

Castle in the Air

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Summary: A modern ROTBTD where dragons are known to have once existed, but are long since extinct. Hiccup is injured and sees a fabled Night Fury, but nobody believes him, and as he starts to recall a suppressed memory from his past, he begins to fall apart. I don't even know, but I hope you (cry) like it. Jackunzel and eventual Mericcup.

1. Chapter 1

This fic is also hosted on AO3.

>I'm not putting this in crossovers because FF still only allows you to pick two categories.

Castle in the Air

The late afternoon sun beat down on the pavement, creating rippling waves of heat that danced across the lot. Very dramatic, I thought, good opening line for a story. I have a tendency to do thatâ€”to narrate events in my head as I'm seeing them unfold. Not to mention the imaginary situations, the scenarios that play out in my head that no one else is aware of. As far as I know I've always done it, and I can't count the number of times people have given me funny looks because I'm standing there muttering to myself. I guess in my enthusiasm for prose, I just can't manage to internalize my (mostly) silent dialogue.

"Why don't you just fucking write a book and get it over with?" my best friend of the past decade or so, Jack Frost, often asks me. To be honest, I've tried, but the words always seem to fall flat as soon as I try to put them to paper. Maybe I just need more practiceâ€”Neil Gaiman said on his blog that it's rare for a writer to get a book written and published before they turn twenty-six, so I have plenty of time.

Sometimes I feel like I'm just waiting for the right inspiration, the

perfect catalyst to jump-start my brain. If I sit and focus hard enough I can almost feel it, the great, big something-or-other that's going to help me get my thoughts in order so that I can write them down cohesively.

"Yo, Hic." I started, realizing that I'd been standing in the parking lot behind the music store where Jack works for about ten minutes, just staring off into space. Turning, I saw him leaning out the back door, watching me. "Daydreaming again?" he asked with a smirk.

"No."

"Liar. Come inside, it's hot as balls out here." Jack has little tolerance for the heat of summer, and has been known to open the windows in our off-campus apartment in the dead of winter because it was "too stuffy" for him.

Admittedly, it was a lot cooler in the confines of the store, where Jack and his boss were finishing closing up for the day. "Can you grab that box for me?" he asked as I followed him through the small stockroom.

"I'm sorry; do I look like I work here?" I quipped, gesturing to my street clothes, which contrasted greatly with his black and white work shirt.

"Don't get smart with me, Haddock, I'll slap the shit out of you," he shot back, jerking his hand up threateningly. I ducked back with a laugh, and scooped up the box he'd indicated—of course it was heavier than it looked.

"Jesus, what do you have in here, gold bars?" I huffed as I lugged the box out onto the sales floor.

"No, just a few bricks of cocaine. You can put it over there by the counter." My curiosity got the better of me, and I peeked under the folded, cardboard flaps to see that the box was actually packed with bottles of nail polish. There was a rack of the same brand by the registers; all the colors had names like "Blood of My Enemies Red" and "Bottle of Tears Blue."

"What do you think?" I asked, picking up a few of the tiny glass vials, "'Jealous Bitch Green', or 'Darkness of My Soul Black?'"

"Nah, you're definitely 'Unstable Orange,'" Jack said as he gripped the edge of the counter and vaulted over it, rather than just walking around behind it like a normal person.

"Do people wear this stuff ironically, or do they really buy into it?"

"Who the fuck knows?" he shrugged as he opened the register and pulled out the tray, "I had a girl come in here today wearing hand-made demon horns on her head. Nail polish is pretty far down on the list of weird shit I see on a day to day basis, my friend."

"You're one to talk, dye-job," I said, nodding up at his pate of

silvery-white hair.

"What can I say, the chicks dig it."

"Does Rapunzel know how much they dig it?"

"You know she doesn't give a shit about that." It's trueâ€"Rapunzel is the first girl I've ever seen him date who is not completely out of her mind possessive. I was surprised how normal she was when he introduced us, actually. She's a sweet girl, smart, bold, and without a jealous bone in her body. I've actually seen her point out other pretty girls to Jack, and watched the both of them check said girls out as a couple.

If they aren't a match made in heaven, then I honestly don't know what to believe in anymore.

"Hey, thanks for coming to pick me up again, by the way," Jack said after his boss had finally closed up shop, "I can't believe my car just died like that. You hear that? Fuck you, Jeep!" he shouted at the offending vehicle, sitting unassumingly in an "employee parking only" space on the other side of the lot.

"Don't worry about it."

"No, dude, I have to. I mean, look at it, just sitting there. I went to drive over to Dunks for some coffee on my break, and it just started pouring oil all over the place. What kind of shit is that?"

"I didn't mean don't worry about your car, I meant don't worry about me coming to get you," I clarified, "As in 'you're welcome, Jack, that's what friends are for.'"

"I knew that," he said as he waited for me to unlock my own car.

"I guess this means we're taking my car tomorrow after all," I said.

"That it does," Jack agreed, "I guess I'm glad this happened today rather than while we're driving down some random road in the middle of nowhere."

"See? There's your silver lining."

"In the middle of nowhere in the dark," he said, "and then we hear something scraping along the side of the car."

"Can you stop?"

"And there's a dead body hanging from a nearby tree. And then when I go poke it with a stickâ€", "

"Of course you'd poke it with a stick."

"â€"its eyes snap open, and then it turns into a demon that eats our skin."

"Are you done?"

"Y-es," he replied slowly, tilting his head back thoughtfully as he leaned back in the passenger-side seat.

After a belated stop at Dunkin Donuts we were finally on our way home. We were a week into summer break from the local university we both attended, but between the heat and having to work, it didn't feel like much of a vacation so far. "Good God, I hate this town," Jack muttered as a group of tourists cut across the road in front of my car, forcing me to stop short. "I still can't believe you didn't take the chance to escape when you had it." As my best friend, Jack occasionally feels the need to berate me for my "poor decision making skills," as he calls them. "You could have gone to Harvard, or Yale, and you stayed here!" is the summation of what he usually winds up saying. "You're the smartest motherfucker I know. If you gave up your chance for an Ivy League education because of loyalty to me, then I'm going to kick your genius ass across the graduation stage."

"That's not it," I always tell him. It's not a total lie. Jack didn't have the best upbringing, and I would feel guilty if I had left him here on his own. Not that he would be alone—not anymore, at least.

Besides, it's not like I really know what I want to do with my life after graduation anyway. My major is literature, but I take art too, and I like history, and architecture, and math—basically most of my classes except for psychology. Jack and I had taken it together in our second semester, and while it wasn't exactly boring, our professor was opinionated and long-winded, not to mention condescending. The straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak, was the day he handed back a paper I'd done on somnology—the study of sleep—with a big red D on the front.

I was willing to stew in silent fury for the rest of the semester, but when Jack saw the grade I'd been given he stood up in class and called the teacher a "twat." Long story short, we both narrowly avoided disciplinary action, and Rapunzel had given Jack a long lecture on the misuse of female anatomical terminology.

"You wanna order a pizza or something?" I asked as we finally reached our destination—home sweet home was a small two bedroom apartment we'd rented together just off campus. The landlord rented primarily to students, so the rent was cheap, but the building also tended to have a lot of issues. I'd had to fix the kitchen sink myself after the superintendent had tried and failed to do so three times in a row. "If your psychology career doesn't work out you could always take up plumbing," Jack had teased.

"Nah, I gotta finish packing," he said with a shake of his head.

"You didn't even start, did you?"

"I still have fourteen hours left. Don't worry about it," he said after a brief glance at his watch.

"You're gonna procrastinate yourself into an early grave, Frost!" I called after him as he disappeared into his disaster area of a room. I caught a glimpse of him flipping me the bird before he shut his door, then I headed toward the fridge with a sigh.

I had finished packing two days ago, my belongings neatly arranged in my duffel bag. My room was cleaner too, though to Jack's credit he at least keeps the mess relegated to his own space.

One of the few things we have in common aside from a profound love of sarcasm is that neither of us can cook to save our lives, so our fridge is usually stocked with frozen dinners and cold-cuts. I was halfway through constructing a turkey and cheese sandwich when our intercom buzzedâ€”I could hear the swelling throb of Jack's sound system vibrating through the building, so I knew he wouldn't have heard it. "It's me!" Rapunzel's voice answered when I asked who was there, and I buzzed her up, leaving the door open a crack for her to let herself in.

A few minutes later I heard her calling from our tiny front hallway. "Guys?"

"In here, Punz," I said as I contemplated whether I wanted to cut my sandwich into triangles or rectangles.

"Hey, Hiccup!" she said brightly, and I turned to lean into the half-hug she offered me, and saw that she had brought along a surprise guest.

"Who's this?" I asked, gesturing to the furry bundle wrapped in her arms.

"Oh, he tried to run out the front door on my way in," she said, hefting the purring, ginger cat she was holding, "Do you know who he belongs to?"

"I think to the girls down the hall," I said, "Here, I'll take him over."

"Where's Jack?" she asked as she handed the animal over with a slight pout.

"In the Bat Cave," I responded dryly.

Grinning, she asked, "Let me guess, he's packing for the 'Manly Man-Trip?'"

"Oh, God, is that what he's calling it?"

"Are you honestly surprised?"

"No, actually, I'm not. Just regretting our whole friendship, that's all." Giggling, she turned and flounced out of the kitchen, and I held onto the cat as he tried to climb up over my shoulder. "No you don't," I said admonishingly, "Come on, I'm sure somebody is freaking out over your absence." Honestly, I like cats, and in the back of my mind I was already entertaining the notion of keeping the fluffy little guy if it turned out that he didn't belong to anyone. In fact, I've always had an affinity for most animals, and they for me in turn. Dogs that were normally shy or unfriendly would warm up to me instantly, I knew all the neighborhood cats personally, and my father had constantly had to call animal control to come pick up this or that wild animal I'd brought home as a pet when I was little. "Raccoons carry rabies!" he'd shouted at me on one particular

occasion, but I really don't see why I couldn't have kept the bunnies at least.

The two girls sharing the apartment at the end of the hall let loose twin cries of relief when they opened the door and saw me standing there with their cat. All at once my hopes were dashed, but at the same time I was glad Rapunzel had caught him when she had. "Oh, Sammy, don't ever do that again!" one of his owners cooed as she hugged him tight.

"Thank you so much!" the other said, "We totally owe you, right Becky?"

"Of course! We're going to a party tomorrow, you should totally come!"

"Totally, omg, you're roommates with that Jack guy, right? We could double date!"

"Ah," I hedged, trying to slowly edge away as I realized what they were getting at, "He has a girlfriend, actually, andâ€",

"That's okay," Becky said with a suggestive lilt, "I'm sure we could work _something_ out."

"Gee, you know, I wish I could but we, ah, are going out of time, but, ah, rain check, alright?" Ladies' man I am not, much to Jack's everlasting chagrin. I beat a hasty retreat, locking the door behind me for good measure. It's not exactly that I'm afraid of womenâ€"it's just that overt sexual advances from people I don't know make me uncomfortable. A year ago, that would have been the sort of thing Jack would have been into, and he'd have tried to get me to go along with it. Thankfully he has Rapunzel now to keep him occupied.

I settled down on the couch with my sandwich and flicked through the channels on our almost laughably small television until I found a nature documentary that looked reasonably interesting. The hostâ€"a middling man rocking a pony-tailâ€"was walking along a forest trail, delivering a monologue about extinct wildlife.

"â€|as a species were hunted to extinction in the early eighteenth century," he said, "Though accounts of dragon sightings continue to this day in more rural parts of the world."

"Yeah right," Jack said from behind me, nearly making me drop my sandwich, "I bet Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster were there, too."

"Well, dragons _were_ real," I said.

"So were dinosaurs and giant ape-menâ€"doesn't mean they still exist," he scoffed.

"There have been people who've found animals that were previously thought to be extinct," I countered, "The coelacanth, for exampleâ€",

"Oh, dear God, here we go."

"â€"is a species of fish that was thought to have died out millions

of years ago, until a fisherman caught one off the coast of South Africa in 1938â€", "

"I don't care."

"â€"which is a phenomenon known as Lazarus taxon."

"You really are an insufferable know-it-all, you know that, Hiccup?"

"Of course I know that. Like you said, I know everything, Jack."

"Whatever. You gonna finish that sandwich?" he asked, grabbing for my plate, which I clutched defensively, leaning away to hold it as far out of his reach as possible. Undeterred, he began climbing over me to get to my plate, and from there the whole situation might have devolved into an all-out wrestling match if Rapunzel hadn't intervened.

"Jack, stop trying to steal Hiccup's sandwich," she tutted, "If you want one that badly, you can make your own."

"Anybody can just go make a sandwich," he said as I tried to shove him away, "But in order to survive I must steal a hundred sandwiches and consume their essence!"

"I'm gonna shave your eyebrows off in your sleep if you don't get off of me!" I threatened.

"Bold words coming from a man without a sandwich!" Jack shouted triumphantly as he swiped my sandwich off the plate and somehow jumped up and ran back into his room before I could even sit up. He's always been about ten times faster than most peopleâ€"the sports scholarship he got for track and field could tell anybody that much.

With a roll of her eyes, Rapunzel asked if I would like her to make me another sandwich. "That's alright," I said, rolling my eyes, "I'll just have some ice cream for dinner. Besides, I LICKED THE TURKEY ALL OVER. HE'S EATING MY SALIVA."

"I DON'T CARE."

"I told him not to," Rapunzel said with an apologetic smile.

"Try hitting him with a rolled up newspaper next time. That always works for me."

Jack didn't finish packing until around one in the morning, by which time I was dozing off in my room with a book on my chest. At least until he knocked on the door and woke me up. "Dude, we have to get up in six hours," I groaned as he crept in and took a seat on the edge of my bed.

"I can't sleep."

"So, tell Punz to whack you upside the head with a frying pan."

"You know my skull's too thick for that to have any effect," he said,

rubbing his chin in contemplation. "You ready for our Manly Man-Trip?"

"I won't be if you don't let me go to sleep."

"Manly men don't need sleep."

"Jack, there's absolutely dick about either of us that's 'manly' in any sense of the word. I mean, look at how tight your pants are."

"What's wrong with my pants?"

"The fact that I can see way more of your junk than I ever would have wanted to, for one."

"Hey, if you don't like it, then don't look," he said with a smirk.

"Don't you have a girlfriend you could be harassing right now?" I asked, only mildly irritated despite the late hour.

"I don't want to wake her up."

"Wow, how considerate of you to worry about waking somebody up in the middle of the night," I grumbled sarcastically.

"Please, like you were even sleeping," he said, plucking the book I'd been reading out of my hands, "'Watership Down'—why's there bunnies on the cover? It sounds like some kind of navy novel."

"You're kidding, right?" I asked, incredulous. When he only continued to stare at me blankly I sighed and sat up, "We read this—or we were supposed to read it—in Lit I. It's about rabbits, not boats, though it's actually meant to be an allegory about escaping from tyranny and oppression, and rational thought versus emotion. How did you even pass that class?"

"I skated by on my good looks."

"You're an idiot."

"You knew that about me before we started dating, Hiccup." I shoved him bodily off of my bed, and he quickly scrambled to his feet, laughing as he bounded back out of my room. I got up and shut the door behind him, then I returned to my bed, this time turning the light off so as to discourage him from further intrusions.

Morning came far too quickly for my liking. Jack was miraculously awake first, and he came into my room again and gave me a wake-up call that consisted of him sticking an ice cube down the back of my shirt. If I hadn't been so tired, I would have strangled him, but at least he'd made breakfast. Or he'd attempted to make breakfast—the scrambled eggs were edible, but he'd managed to burn the toast completely black, and the stove was on fire when I walked into the room.

"Do I want to know how this happened?" I asked, pointing to our mini fire extinguisher—living with Jack, it's a necessary accoutrement.

"Probably not," he said.

Rapunzel got out of bed long enough to bid us goodbye, still in her pajamas with a half-awake look on her face. "I'll lock up when I leave," she said sleepily, standing on her toes to kiss Jack goodbye. "You boys be safe," she added, giving me a significant look that said "don't let him start a forest fire" as she hugged me and quickly pecked me on the cheek.

"We'll be fine," I promised.

"You want me to drive?" Jack asked as we stuffed our bags into the trunk of my car, and I nodded with a yawn, handing him my keys. "Sorry I woke you up last night, I really thought you were still awake."

"It's fine," I said, "I'll sleep on the way there."

"But you'll miss all the scenery!"

"I'll risk it," I said wryly, "Stop at Dunks, though, I need caffeine if I'm going to make it through the day."

"You don't need to tell me twice. Manly Man-Trip, here we come!"

"I swear to God, Jack."

2. Chapter 2

"I just wanted an easy, mindless job that I could do while I went to school, y'know?" I said, watching the landscape whip by through the passenger window as Jack made a noise in the affirmative. Two hours into our journey and we were well away from the press of ever-present civilization; the world outside of my car now consisted of endless forest, and intermittent flashes of the mountains beyond. On a whim I rolled down my window, and found the air to be devoid of the perpetual tang of pollution that I was familiar with. "And now," I continued, turning to focus on the ever-winding road ahead, "I practically run the whole damn place."

"Did you tell them to get off your back?" Jack asked, frown lines creasing his forehead as he glared through the windshield.

"Yes! Like, eight-thousand times! I told them when I started that I didn't want to be in customer service, and now not only am I in charge of customer service, I'm in charge of all the slacker-ass idiots at the registers. And they say, 'Oh, Hiccup, you're such a good worker even though you hate your job! Oh, by the way, here's more work for you to do because nobody else is competent enough to do it!'"

"You should tell them to go fuck themselves, man. Aren't you like the youngest person there?"

"Aside from some of the cashiers, yeah," I said, "My dad says it'll look good on my resume, but it's not like I'm going to be a professional hardware store worker for the rest of my life."

"You _hope_."

"Please, if I'm still working there after I graduate, I want you to promise me you'll push me down a flight of stairs."

"Can do, bro. Hey, look, food stop ahead. You wanna pull over? I need sustenance," he said, holding his hand up and dramatically curling his fingers into a fist.

"Yeah," I agreed as the road sign advertising an upcoming rest stop flashed by. I was sure that Jack was going way over the speed limit for the road that we were on, but telling him to slow down would be like telling a puppy to stop being adorable. It just wasn't going to happen.

Despite being so far out in the sticks that there wasn't a house for miles around, the rest stop came with not only bathrooms and vending machines, but also a small gift shop for travelers. Jack leapt out of the car and raced for the bathroom as soon as the car was parked and I, being curious by nature and needing to stretch my legs, decided to go browsing.

A bored looking girl manning the counter barely looked up when I walked through the door. Inside, the shop seemed to be part knick-knack store and part convenience mart. None of the baubles really drew my interest—the giant sunglasses and weird t-shirts were more Jack's thing, and upon entering the shop he began examining the assorted trinkets with enthusiasm. "Hey, Hic, look!" I heard him say behind me as I perused a vast array of candy bars whose brands I had never heard of.

"What? What is _that_?"

"It's a rainbow moose!" he said gleefully, holding the shirt up to himself, "What do you think?"

The shirt was an electric blue color, and the moose in question was frolicking across the front, his entire body limned in rainbows. To top it off, he was wearing barred sunglasses, and had glittery antlers. "I think it suits you," I told him.

"Fucking right it does. This place is awesome. You want me to pick something out for you?"

"No."

"It's weird, that 'yes' sounded an awful lot like a 'no' for some reason. Oh well. Don't worry; I'll get you something flattering."

Fearing the invariable wardrobe disaster that was to come, I loaded a hand basket with the weird, local snacks, and went up to the counter to pay. "Moustache!" Jack shouted from somewhere in the back of the shop as the checkout girl rang me up.

"Hurry up, Jack, I'm almost done," I called out, grinning apologetically at the girl. "You guys take debit cards?"

"Yes we do," she said, suddenly all smiles, "So—are you guys going camping or something?"

"Yeah," I told her, "My dad has a cabin up the mountain, we're gonna spend the weekend there."

"Just the two of you?"

"Yup, just the two of us."

"We're actually on our honeymoon," Jack said as he came up behind me and dropped an armload of junk on the counter, "Right babe?"

"Right," I agreed dryly as he swung an arm around my shoulder. "Agh, stop!" I yelped when he stood up and tried to kiss me on the cheek, "Ugh, no, I don't want your germs. Get off me!" I wiped my face on my shoulder, fighting a grin as I fished out my debit card and handed it to the poor cashier, who was very obviously trying not to laugh.

"You guys are so funny," she said, biting her lip as she put my things in a bag.

"We do our best," Jack said, giving her his best eyebrow waggle, "Hey, is there a package store around here anywhere, by chance?"

"Oh, yeah," she said, "here, I'll write down directions for you. It's not far." We thanked her for her help, then exited the shop and headed back toward my car

"Gimme my keys," I said.

"Why, you don't like my driving?" Jack said, smirking as he tossed them over.

"That, and if you're the one trying to follow the directions that girl gave us, we'll wind up in Morocco."

I stuck my bag in the back, and then climbed back into the driver's seat. "Hey, check it out," Jack said beside me.

"What?"

Grinning broadly, he held up the piece of paper the cashier had written her directions on; in the top corner she'd scribbled her phone number along with the name Heather. Scrawled beneath in tiny letters were the words "for the tall one! xoxo ;)."

"You're the 'tall one'," Jack said with a knowing leer.

"I know I'm the tall one," I huffed, slamming the door shut and turning the key in the ignition. Up until we were about fourteen, I had been head and shoulders shorter than Jack. Then over the course of one long and uncomfortable freshman year, I'd experienced a belated growth spurt, and had skyrocketed up until I towered over nearly all of our friends. I had thought that after a while Jack would get tired of making tall jokes, but unfortunately one of his foremost pleasures in life is taking the piss out of me.

"Are you gonna call her?"

"Why would I call her? I have no idea who she is."

"You would if you called her, man! Come on, this is how humans interact with each other, how we meet new people."

"And if I did call her?" I asked as I pulled out of the rest stop lot, "Then what? I'm not gonna drive all the way out here to see her again."

"Who says you have to? She knows we're not from around here! You don't have to 'woo' her, or whatever the fuck it is that you do with girls. That's not what she's expecting."

"You know I'm not like that, Jack," I said exasperatedly, "Can you please just let it go?"

"Fine, fine," he sighed, "It's just a waste of a perfectly good phone number."

"So, you call her then."

"Pssh." Before he'd started dating Punz he would have. Hell, he probably wouldn't even have told me about the phone number, just squirrelled it away for later use.

A few minutes passed in relative silence, broken up only by Jack telling me to take this turn, or watch out for that stop sign as he followed the girl's directions. Then he said, "Hey, remember when your dad thought we were dating?"

"What do you mean 'thought'?" I replied, "He's still not entirely convinced we aren't."

"Are you serious?" he snickered.

"Yes. For a while I think he forgot about it, because I was going out with Astrid, but then she went to UCLA, and you remember on New Year's—that karaoke bar we went to, and we got drunk and you convinced me to sing Total Eclipse of the Heart with you?"

"Of course I remember, your cousin posted a video of us on Facebook," Jack said sourly, "Punz nearly died laughing when she saw it."

"Well, my dad somehow managed to not only figure out how to turn on the computer, but how to get on Facebook and watch that video. Like, he told me he saw it, and he didn't say anything else, but I could just see it in his eyes," I said as Jack burst out laughing.

"Oh, man I love your dad," he said, "Was he mad, or was it just that disappointed look he gets?"

"I don't think he was mad. I don't think he would be if I was gay. He'd probably just be like, 'Oh, well, that explains everything then,'" I said with a roll of my eyes. My dad had long ago given up trying to get me to show an interest in his so-called "manly" activities. When he'd taken me camping I would run off to play with caterpillars and collect shiny rocks rather than learn to start a fire or hunt for my dinner. When he'd signed me up for little league

I had been too afraid of being hit by the ball to be able to play, so I'd wound up sitting on the sidelines all of the time. And when I'd joined the drama club in high school rather than try out for any teams, he'd finally seemed to get the message that I wasn't ever going to be the macho kid he could live vicariously through.

"You could always try telling him that being good at sports doesn't mean you're not gay," Jack said contemplatively.

"I don't know. I wouldn't want to so wildly disrupt his world views," I sighed.

My phone began to ring as we finally reached a stretch of highway that showed signs of being inhabited by human beings. "Speak of the devil," I muttered as the liquor store finally came into view.

"Your dad?"

"Yeah," I said, completely without a clue as to why he would be calling me now and fearing an emergency. More likely than not, though, he'd forgotten that Jack and I were even going up to the cabin this weekend and had some task he wanted me to perform. The ability to fix things is one of the few activities we have in common, so sometimes he'll call me over to help him repair something. These instances are rare, and typically quiet—we've known each other for almost twenty years and we still have nothing to talk about. "Hey dad."

"Hiccup," he said in his usual gruff brogue, "Have you reached the cabin yet?"

"No, dad. We're almost there." Jack made an elaborate gesture at me as I parked the car, which I took to mean as, "Do you want me to get you anything?" I waved my hand to indicate that I didn't care what he got, and he climbed out of the car, digging in his pockets to ensure that he had his fake I.D. When he had gotten it I'd told him that nobody would ever believe that he was a twenty-seven year old Italian guy named Giuseppe Fernando, but so far I'd been proven wrong at every turn.

"You're not letting Jack drive, are you?" he said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. As long as I've known Jack, my dad has never really seemed to have been able to decide what to make of him, no more than he can understand me. On the one hand, Jack was my first real friend, the one who really drew me out of my shell and got me to start doing more "boy stuff," like setting off firecrackers and coming home covered in dirt. On the other hand, Jack is Jack, so there was an equally likely chance of me coming home covered in glitter.

"No, dad," I lied.

"Because that boy drives like a lunatic."

"I know."

"You're not talking on the phone and driving at the same time, are you?"

"No, I'm parked right now."

"Good, good. Now I know I said it already, but you boys watch yourselves out there."

"I know dad."

"There's a lot of wild animals in those mountains. Did you bring the bear mace I gave you?"

"_Yes_."

"And there's a rifle hidden in the back of the closet in my room, just in case."

"Okay, dad."

"Don't let Jack use it."

"Okay."

"Don't even let him know it's _there_."

"_Okay_."

"And, if you two are going to drink, don't go joy riding or set anything on fire, alright?"

"Yes, dad, I promise. No fires, no shooting, and I won't let Jack destroy anything."

"Good. See you when you get back then."

"Yeah, dad. See you." The line went dead. My dad's never been real big on sentiment, but he has his own way of telling me that he cares at least.

I sighed, and took the opportunity to check my messages while I still couldâ€”a few more miles up the mountain and I wouldn't be able to get a signal. Jack and I would be functionally cut off from the rest of the world. The tech nerd in me felt a vast amount of unease at the thought of not being able to play Words With Friends for an entire two days, but the socially anxious loner in me was relieved at having an excuse to disappear for a while. I'm just a bundle of conflicting emotions, I guess.

Jack returned, carrying a paper bag to mark yet another successful underage alcohol accrurement ruse. "Take this," he said, holding the bag out to me through the open window, then crawling through said window and wriggling around until he was seated upright.

"What'd you get?" I asked, twisting in my seat and setting the heavy bag down on the floor behind it.

"Beer, and nips for you since you're too good to swill it with the rest of us," he said.

"Aw, how thoughtful."

"That's me. I'm just full of thoughts," he agreed as I turned back out onto the road. "So, what'd your dad want?"

"He was just warning me about the dangers of unprotected gay sex."

"Whaâ€are you serious?"

"No."

"Fucking _A_, Hiccup."

X

"This is it?" Jack sounded almost apprehensive as I let my car roll up along the side of the squat, rustic looking structure that was my father's cabin.

"This is it," I confirmed, killing the engine and sitting back. It had taken us another hour after leaving the package store to get here, and I was glad because I was sick of being on the road.

"Dude," Jack said, "This place looks like a Stephen King novel waiting to happen." I laughed as I pushed my door open and climbed out of the car, stretching and regarding the scenery around me. The cabin sat in the midst of a large clearing, the ground mostly dirt and moss. A trail led off through the trees to the side of the building, and off in the distance we could see the tops of other mountains peeking up over the treetops. "I'm serious, Hic," he said, "This place looks like it's just crawling with serial killers."

"Jack, relax. I've been here plenty of times, and I was never murdered by an insane criminal," I assured him.

"So you say," he muttered, slamming the car door shut behind him and eyeballing the cabin suspiciously. "You could have told me it was all creepy looking, at least."

"It is not. Stop being a baby, and come get your crap out of my trunk."

Inside, the cabin was slightly musty. My and dad I hadn't been up here in a few years, but he was in the habit of coming up here every couple of months to air it out and make sure that nobody had broken in, which has happened before. One time he came home from one of his trips up here and told me that somebody had broken in and lived in the cabin for at least a few weeks, then left a note apologizing for it. If I had been worried about anything driving up here, it had been that I might walk in on such an intruder.

Jack and I spent an hour opening all the windows, and putting our things away. He balked when he saw me walking out of my room with a kerosene lamp and a book of matches. "Did you really think this place would have electricity?" I asked, amused by his stunned reaction.

"Well, considering that it's 2013, yeah," he said disdainfully, "How am I gonna charge my iPod?"

"Positive thinking?" I suggested, to which he just shook his head in disgust. "Sorry, man. My dad wanted this place to be off the map, and

off the grid. It does have indoor plumbing if that makes you feel any better."

"Thank God," Jack said, breathing a sigh of relief, "If I had to use an outhouse I would have had to take a bath in Purell."

I set the lamp and matches by the front door where we could find them easily. "You wanna hike up to the pond?" I asked Jack through the door to the extra bedroom.

"Fuck yeah," he said, "Just hang on a sec. Which bag is it inâ€¦," I heard something crinkling, then he straightened, clutching something to his chest as he turned toward me, a wicked grin on his face.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked warily.

"Remember at the store when you asked me to pick something out for you?"

"I remember asking you not to."

"Whatever. Shut up and close your eyes."

"I don't want to."

"Do it."

"But I'm scared."

"You should be." Reluctantly, I closed my eyes and waited for him to do whatever it was he was going to do, fairly certain that I wasn't going to like it. I could feel him draping something over the front of my body, then a moment later he said, "Okay, open up."

"Oh, good God Jack. I am not wearing this," I said, glaring down at the t-shirt he'd gotten for me. It was a leaf-green color, and almost entirely plain except for the large, brown, and hideous fuzzy moustache sewn across the front.

"You have to. I spent good money on that shirt, and it is a quality shirt, and you should wear it because I'm going to take pictures and put them on my blog."

"That doesn't make me any more eager to wear it," I said flatly.

"Put on the shirt, Hiccup, or I will tell your dad about that time Astrid thought she was pregnant and you cried at my house for three hours."

"You're lying," I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Am I?" Arms folded, expression dead serious, it was hard to tell. Though I was relatively certain that my best friend wouldn't really sell me out like that, I had pretty much known from the start that I was going to put the shirt on. The entire argument had really just been a bluff, an attempt to save face.

"This is super fucking itchy, Jack," I muttered as he skipped down the front steps ahead of me, turning to take a picture of me with his

camera.

"You'll get used to it," he said, spinning and snapping a few shots of the mountain range beyond the trees.

"You wanna trade?" I asked, staring covetously at his moose-shirt. He had put it on in the car, which had led to a lot of arm flailing and squirming on his part, and that can be very distracting when you're trying to drive.

"Fuck no," he replied simply. "Let's go! Maybe we'll see a real moose, and he'll let me ride him."

"I really hope we _don't_, " I said, "Moose can be unpredictable, _especially_ bull moose."

"Okay, Jack Hannah, can we cool it with the biology lessons? I want to enjoy nature, not be lectured about it," he said with mock scorn, heading toward the nearest trail, hefting the pack full of "supplies" he was carrying.

"Alright, fine, whatever you say. The pond is this way, though, soâ€¦" I turned to head for the correct trail, and he rushed up from behind and shoulder-butted me playfully.

We could have made the pond in twenty minutes, but with Jack needing to stop and document everything he saw, from salamanders, to deer prints, to what turned out to be poison ivy, it took well over an hour. Unlike me, Jack had spent most of his life in the city, and had little if any exposure to wildlife, so I could understand his exuberance. "Are these blueberries?" he asked me, already preparing to eat one of a handful of little fruits he'd found.

"That, or yew berries, which are poisonous by the way."

"Agh!" he spat, throwing the berriesâ€"which _were_ blueberriesâ€"into the deadfall. "Don't laugh, Hiccup, you asshole, I could die!" He licked his sleeve, and rinsed his mouth with water from the bottle I offered him to remove any residual berry juice. "You're a jackass," he muttered.

The pond was placid, the surface almost perfectly flat, like a shimmering pane of glass set into the landscape, until Jack tried to skim a rock, and sent waves of ripples arcing across the water. "Damn, dude," he said, "I've never seen this much water all in one place, except maybe at the aquarium."

"This is just a pond," I told him, "Next time we take a trip, we'll go to the ocean and you'll shit a brick." Every so often I'm reminded of how much easier I've had it than Jack, despite all of my own supposed problems. He had lost both of his parents when he was still really young, and from the way he acted you wouldn't think that it fazed him at all.

There was a small pier, a totally unnecessary addition to the pond that somebody had wasted their time building. As far as I knew, there weren't any fish larger than a minnow living in the pond, unless my dad had stocked it at some point, and we didn't have any fishing gear, or a boat. Still, Jack ran down to the end of it, snapping pictures, leaning and bending this way and that to try to get the

perfect angle. Ever since Rapunzel had gotten him that camera for his birthday, he had become obsessed with photography. I felt weirdly grateful about it, Jack finally having a hobby to pursue. There had been one time when he had lamented at his lack of skills"aside from being "swagtastic"which had taken me completely by surprise.

Out of the two of us, Jack was the social one, the one with all the friends, and the girlfriends, not to mention the athletic talent. "I have no marketable skills, Hic. I mean, I'm not gonna be a professional runner," he'd said, "As a career, I feel like track and field wouldn't have a very long shelf-life. You, though, you could do whatever you want." As long as I'd known Jack I had secretly wished that I could be more like him, so it came as quite a shock to find out that he wished he was more like me.

I guess that all relationships are like that, in one way or another. But the revelation had left me feeling unaccountably guilty, probably seeing as how I have all these "skills" and absolutely no idea as to what I want to use them for.

Jack must have taken about five thousand pictures by the end of that day alone. He led me on a trek around the pond, which was about five miles all-told, and took up the better part of the afternoon. At one point we startled a deer"or rather, the deer startled us, or maybe everyone was equally startled, because Jack screamed and the deer bolted off comically through the underbrush. "Shit, I didn't get any pictures of it!" he fumed afterward.

By the time we came back around, Jack was complaining that the bag was getting too heavy to carry, so we walked down to the end of the dock and he slung it off, setting it down on the creaky planks. He took off his shoes and hung his legs over the edge, though his feet didn't quite reach the water. I joined him as he unzipped his bag and fished out his pack of beer, and handed me a tiny bottle of vodka.

"Really, Jack? Do you want me to wind up crying in a puddle of my own vomit tonight?"

"Shut up and drink your alcohol, Hiccup, or you'll never grow big and strong like me." Tall as I am, I'm not exactly a lightweight, but neither am I an alcohol enthusiast. Jack has a better tolerance for it than I do, and the fact that I can't drink beer due to it tasting like bile doesn't help.

Rather than risk making myself ill, I sipped from the tiny bottle slowly as we sat on the pier, listening to the forest around us. Neither of us said anything for a long time; we just watched, completely still. Jack tucked one leg up under his body and fished a pair of sunglasses out of his pack as the sun began to dip down on the horizon. It would still be a few hours before it set, but now it blazed across the water, making us squint. My solution was to lie back on the planks and close my eyes, listening to buzzing of insects and the calls of birds.

"Nature is neat," Jack said out of the blue, and something about the way he said it struck me as particularly funny. I started laughing, and I couldn't stop, not until I was out of breath and he was laughing along at my disproportionate reaction. "I think you've had enough," he said, though I hadn't even finished my first bottle.

We finally headed back down to the cabin a few hours later, after a long conversation about our individual childhoods. It felt easier to talk about things like that, way out here where nobody could overhear us. I don't even remember how the subject came up, but I wound up telling Jack about the time my dad had tried to take me hunting, but I had been too soft-hearted to pull the trigger, not to mention too clumsy to hold a gun correctly. I worry about telling him stories like that, considering he didn't have a father figure in his life until just a few years ago, but he doesn't begrudge me anything.

"I feel so manly, Hic, out in all this rugged back-country," he said, trailing behind me on the hike back through the woods, "Can I have a piggyback ride?"

"Sure."

X

"_Hiccup. Hiccuuuup_." The next morning I awoke to the sound of Jack's loud whispering coming from my bedroom door.

"Ugh, what?" I groaned, rolling away from him. He ought to know by now that I'm not a morning person, by any stretch.

"Dude, come outside."

"Why?"

"Just come outside!" he hissed before disappearing from sight. Muttering an incoherent string of curses, I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of the bed. I didn't bother changing out of my pajamas yet, but I did lean over to check my phone—the battery was on its last legs, but the clock was still working at least. It was just after nine-thirty in the morning, and we'd stayed up late into the night after I'd lit a fire in the pit out back. Jack had insisted on making s'mores, and then he'd done a fake Latin chant in an attempt to summon the devil.

"Alright, what is it you wanted me to see?" I asked, yawning widely as I stepped out onto the porch. Jack was crouched down by the railing, staring intently at something, camera clutched tightly in his hands.

Without answering, he waved me over, and I heeded his summons with a roll of my eyes. "Look," he whispered as I crouched beside him.

"At what?" The answer came a second later as my eyes landed on a large, green insect clinging to one of the rails.

"It's a praying mantis," he said to me, as if I didn't already know that, then when he noticed the murderous look I was giving him, "What?"

"You called me out here to look at a bug?"

"I've never seen one before!" he said defensively as I stood, "Aren't they endangered around here or something?"

"Yes, which is why I'm not going to shove it down your throat for

waking me up so early."

"Aw, come on, Haddock," he said jovially in the face of my rancor, "We didn't come up here to sleep, we came up here to get wasted and look at weird bugs."

"Ugh."

"Go get dressed, man; I wanna go check out some of those other trails."

"You are way too awake," I grumbled as I reentered the cabin, "Especially for a man who hasn't had his coffee yet."

"I had a soda," he shrugged, "Same dif." It wasn't the "same dif" I found as I followed suit, getting dressed and drinking a Coke in lieu of the coffee I would normally have. This time I let Jack pick the trail, as I was feeling irritable and sleepy from having gotten up earlier than I normally would have the past two days in a row.

The one he chose was steep, of course, and crisscrossed with roots and fallen trees. Jack would jog ahead and vault over them, as I meandered along behind, becoming a little less grouchy as he ran along singing songs from Les Mis. It wasn't the type of movie either of us would ever have watched until Rapunzel convinced us to go see it with her, and now he knows all of the words to every song.

"Sing with me Hiccup!" he crowed, twirling a long stick he'd found, "_I dreamed a dream of days gone byyyy_."

"No," I said flatly. Rapunzel has the voice of an angel, and Jack isn't bad, but I sing like a chicken. The only time I can be convinced to sing is after I've already been convinced to drink enough that my inhibitions are numb and I no longer have the wherewithal to feel shame.

After a while the trail began to level out, becoming more of a rock-strewn expanse than a trail, before flattening out completely into a shelf of dirt and smooth stone. "Check it out," Jack said, waving me over to where he stood. I was still slightly below him, so I couldn't see the way the ground dropped away until we stood side by side. "Good thing we weren't running," he said, "We woulda gone right off the edge."

"No, you would have," I said, "There's no way in hell I would have run up that trail." Below us stretched a wide, zigzagging ravine. Down at the bottom, a good thirty feet below on a steep grade, the ground was relatively flat and sandy, sporting a few shrubs but mostly large rocks. Jack raised his camera and took a few snapshots, turning one way, then the other, as the ravine stretched off both left and right, and presumably went on for miles.

"This place is great," he said, "Shit, I don't even want to leave. Can we just live up here forever, and become burly lumberjacks?"

"What about your iPod?" I asked.

"You can make me a lightning rod that I can attach it to, so it can be powered by nature." A bird began to sing somewhere in the adjacent

trees, and he stepped back from the drop-off, heading toward the sound with his camera raised. I followed behind, slowly walking on the edge of the ravine, looking down as I made my way. One thing I can say is that with all my shortcomings, I've never had a fear of heights, though there are plenty of other things I'm terrified of.

For a few minutes I just strolled along like that, picking my way along the rocky ledge as Jack slipped in and out of the trees ahead of me. Jack was right—"being out here was great. It was so quiet, and there weren't very many people around, not for miles. Maybe he liked it for a different reason than I did, but that didn't matter.

"Hiccup," I heard him say, and I turned toward him, stepping over a rotting tree-limb and onto a good sized rock.

I opened my mouth to say something, maybe "yeah," or "what is it now, another bug?" but I didn't get the chance. I felt it right before it happened, the way the rock shifted in the loose earth beneath me just as I came to stand fully upon it. The noise I made instead was a short of startled gasp, the kind you make when the ground gives way beneath you and you have nothing to grab onto.

"Hiccup?" Jack said when he heard me, spinning around just in time to see my arms pin-wheeling wildly before I dropped out of sight.

x

Review and let me know what you think. It would make me a very happy panda.

3. Chapter 3

"_Hiccup!?"_

Somebody was calling my name. That was the next thing I remember, after my last glimpse of Jack's surprised expression, right before everything went blank. I had seen him take a step toward me, and then there was nothing. Not darkness, or bright shining light, just—nothing. Again, somebody called out for me. I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out. My lungs wouldn't work, and the realization caused sudden, wild panic to course through me. I tried to move, tried to suck in air, only to release a low, pained wheezing as my lungs struggled in vain.

"Hiccup!" Jack's voice was closer now, and a skittering of stone and sand heralded his arrival. "Holy shit," I heard him gasp, "Jesus Christ. Hiccup, can you hear me?" My vision blurred, my eyes clouded by something dark; there was a weird sensation in my eye, almost akin to the sting of sweat. Then Jack was by my side, collapsing to his knees by my side, hands hovering as if he was afraid to touch me. "Oh my God," he hissed, his already pale skin going ashen as he looked me up and down. I could almost hear him swallowing, sucking down a noise of terror. "Stay with me, man," he said shakily, "Don't—don't fall asleep."

"Jack," I rasped, still breathless. I must have gotten the wind

knocked out of me; that was why I felt so stiff, so immobile and unable to breathe. "I'mâ€|," I wanted to tell him I was okay, but something about the look on his face told me that that just wasn't true. I reached up, gripping the front of his shirt, tasting blood. Another pang of fear stabbed through me as I felt the swollen cut on my lip.

"It's okay," he said, pursing his lips and forcing the look of terror off his face with what must have been a great effort. "It's gonna be alright." I saw him digging in his pockets, and he came up with his phone, swearing vehemently as if he'd been hoping that he would magically have service way out here. "Shit. Alright, okay," he was terrified, which only added to my own fear. What was wrong? What could he see that I couldn't feel? There wasn't a great amount of pain, which didn't seem right. There was a dullness, and a heaviness, andâ€|

"Jack," I said as he slipped off his backpack, settling it on the ground beside me.

"I'm right here, man," he assured, tearing his bag open with a determined expression.

"I can't move."

He didn't seem to know what to say to that, but he grew even paler, if that was possible. "It's gonna be alright," he repeated instead, voice shaking the same way my hands were as I reached up, trying to wipe away the stinging, blurry darkness in my eyes. My arms felt heavy, weak, and it took a great effort to move my head. When I did, bright motes swam in my eyes, and a wave of nausea washed through me. My fingers came away from my eyes, warm and sticky._ I'm bleeding_, I thought. I could feel my spine throbbing, the pain deep and dull, but not unbearable. When I tried to move any more than I already had, however, the throbbing arced through my chest, and up my neck into my skull.

Another wounded sound escaped my throat as Jack pulled a bottle of water from his pack and set it down by my hand. "Okay. Here's what we're gonna do," he said to me, trying to speak steadily as he laid a hand on my shoulder, "There's an emergency phone down by the access road. If I run, I can get there in half an hour."

I didn't like that. I didn't want him to leave me there. "No," I said, "Don't, I can'tâ€|,"

"Hiccup, I have to," he said, taking the hand that tried to grab onto him and squeezing it. My grip felt so weak, I couldn't have held him there anyway, "You can't move, and there's no other way for me to get help. Justâ€|don't try to move around, even if you feel like you can. Don't try to get up. I'm gonna leave my bag here, for you."

"Pleaseâ€|,"

"It's gonna be okay, Hic. I'll be right back," he pressed a hand to the side of my face, his eyes wide and afraid, "Half an hour, okay? Just don't fall asleep. Try to stay awake for me." Before I could protest further he was on his feet, scrabbling back up the side of the ravine and out of view. I listened, hearing him swearing, and the

loose dirt and rocks come tumbling down. Then, after a few minutes, there was nothing.

My head began to ache, a slow, dull pulsing beginning behind my eyes, then radiating throughout my skull and jaw. Gradually everything began to hurt, from my fingers down to the roots of my teeth, and a sharp, stabbing pain began to accompany each shallow breath I managed to pull in. I tried to move again, despite Jack's insistence that I remain still. All I wanted was to sit up, but the pain swelled to new heights, knocking me back like a physical force.

Above, the sun seemed to appear out of nowhere, creeping out over the ravine and beating down on me. The water bottle Jack had left sat right next to my left hand. I tried to grip it, but the rush of agony had sapped most of my strength. Now I literally couldn't move. I tried to remain calm, tried to slow my pounding heart. I moved my hand again, forcing it to close around the bottle, lifting my head as much as I dared as I used my other hand to twist off the cap. Thankfully, Jack had left it loose. I took a sip, the water warm, and was going to take another when I noticed the rock.

It must have been what made all the blood drain out of Jack's face when he saw me. It certainly made me feel woozy, disbelieving, and terrified. All in all, it wasn't that big, but it was big enough. It must have been the rock that fell away when I'd stood on it, and now here it was, pinning my left leg to the ground. _I can't feel it_. The thought seemed far away, as if somebody else was thinking it, but it was true. I couldn't feel my leg. The stone didn't quite reach up to my knee, but I couldn't feel anything in that leg below the hip, as if my body had numbed that whole area in order to protect me from some greater hurt I couldn't even imagine.

With a noise that was half frightened whimper, half hiss of pain, I let my head fall back against the ground. How long had Jack been gone? It felt like hours, but it had probably only been a few minutes. _It's gonna be okay_, his voice echoed in my head, so real that I almost thought he was there, that he had come back. But there was nobody. No Jack. Just me and the sun.

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the light. It was doing funny things to my eyes, and it felt overly bright, stark and hot. Jack had told me not to fall asleep, but I wasn't sure if I could stay awake. I had a head injury—I knew that from the way my vision swam, doubling the scenery around me when I opened my eyes. It was dangerous to fall asleep when you had a head injury.

It's gonna be okay. "Jack?" I whispered, my voice hoarse. _No, he's not back yet, remember?_ What was it about head injuries, concussions in particular, that was so dangerous? I tried to remember, but my thoughts seemed to be racing in circles. I thought I heard Jack again, remembering only at the last second that he wasn't here. He had gone to get help.

My eyes had drifted shut again, unbeknownst to me, and as my thoughts became stranger, more disordered, I thought I heard a noise. _No, Jack's not here_, I thought. The noise sounded again—a strange, loud trilling sound, almost birdlike, but deeper, bigger. I struggled to open my eyes, hearing the noise again—it wasn't like Jack's voice, I thought. This was _real_. It was echoing, inhuman, funneling toward me through the ravine. What kind of animal sounded like

that? I had no idea. The thought struck me that it could be a bear, and icy fear shivered up my aching spine.

Please, don't let it be a bear, I pleaded with whatever force it is that controls the universe. Jack kept a knife in his bag, but this time I really couldn't move. Even the fear didn't seem to pump enough adrenaline into my veins to get me moving. How long had it been now? It had to be close to a half an hourâ€"but had Jack said he'd be back in half an hour, or had it been that that was how long it would take him to reach the landline phone? I couldn't remember. Maybe in his panic he hadn't said what he meant.

The cry sounded once more, closer this time. I could hear something, something big rustling through the ravine. _No_, I thought, _go away_. It could probably smell the blood whatever it was. I lay perfectly still, paralyzed now more from fear than from lack of strength. The animal made a loud chirpingâ€"I could hear it now, coming from the direction my feet were pointing in, and I squeezed my eyes shut as it moved slowly closer. _Oh God. If it's going to eat me, please make it quick_.

Almost miraculously, the noises stopped. The world was silentâ€"maybe too silent, but I opened my eyes, staring up at the sun. On sheer willpower alone, I turned my head to the side so that I could see around the rock that my leg was pinned under, and through my blurred vision I sawâ€"something_. I gasped, and it moved, a huge black thing now making a beeline straight toward me. _This isn't real_, I thought wildly, my body suddenly moving on its own, my arms trying to scramble back in a futile effort to escape. The movement did what Jack had probably been afraid it would doâ€"it pulled on my leg, and all of a sudden it didn't feel so numb anymore.

White hot agony ripped through me. I screamed, unmindful of the beast, trying to curl my body up so I could grasp at the pain, but that only made it worse. I fell back again, spent, the agony coursing through me now incomparable to what I had felt earlier. All of that was like a paper-cut compared to this.

A shadow blocked my vision, and I thought I was blacking out, only my eyes were open. "Whaâ€"?" The creature was huge, bigger than any animal I'd ever seen. I couldn't make it out as my vision tunneled, and I was trying to blink away the spinning motes. Something enormous was standing over me, and I was in too much pain now to care. _Go on_, I thought deliriously, _do it_. I waited for the teeth, for the tearing, closing my eyes for what I thought would be the last time.

But nothing came. The animal made a rumbling deep in its chest, and then I felt a warm, dry nose press gently against my cheek, hot breath blowing across my face. I looked up at it again, squinting, trying to see it clearly. Big and black and scaly and winged, I thought, what sort of animal looked like that?

"_I saw it!_" I heard somebody shout. It sounded like a child's voice. "_I saw it! I saw a dragon!_"

Dragon, I thought. _Good. Yes. That makes perfect sense._ The creature huffed again, then I heard it shifting beside me, the underbrush crackling as if it were laying down. It made another soft noise, and I turned my head to look at it once more. A pair of huge

green eyes stared back at me, mere inches from my face. That was the last thing I saw before the world faded to black.

X

The world came into focus slowly, blurred around the edges, and grey. Or rather, everything around me was white, just dimly lit so as to appear grey. A steady beeping reached my ears, and I turned my head, noting the heart monitor that was on a cart to my left. Something else was there, something big, something snoring in a chair that wasn't big enough for him.

"Dad?" I murmured, but he didn't wake up.

I felt like I shouldn't have remembered anything, but I had a vague idea as to why I appeared to be in the hospital. My body ached, and my head felt fuzzy, but I remembered what had happened to me. Or I thought I did.

I fell, I thought. _I fell into that ravine_. Jack had gone to get help and thenâ€¦I had blacked out, apparently. I tried to sit up, but my body resisted, and I realized that it wasn't just because I was stiff and sore, but because there was something wrapped tightly around my chest. Bandages, probably. I had a splint on two of the fingers on my right hand, and my left arm was in a sling, though not in a cast. I didn't remember feeling pain in my arm, but with all the other pains I'd had, that wasn't surprising. On my head, above my left eye there was a patch of gauze taped, covering whatever stitches I'd gotten there, and my lip throbbed. One of my legs seemed to be propped up in some kind of tourniquet, covered in a blanket so I couldn't see what was wrong with it. I could feel it, though, itching and aching, so I figured it must be in a cast.

Aside from all of that, all of the injuries I'd sustained, though, I was alive. I felt a small rush of giddiness at the thought, probably not entirely undue to the morphine drip I noticed was stuck into my arm. There were breathing tubes in my nose as well, and other wires and tubing sticking out of me every which way. I could only imagine how god-awful I looked.

Though I'd only been awake for a few minutes, my mind felt cloudy with weariness. Leaning back onto the bed, I closed my eyes again, letting sleep take me. The dreams I had were disjointed, odd; there was a giant rock falling toward me from the sky, threatening to crush me, and a dark shape stalking me from the shadows. Jack's voice was calling for me from somewhere, but every time I thought I had pinned down the direction, he would call again from somewhere else. _I saw it_, a child's voice called, and I spun in the darkness, but I couldn't see him. _I saw a dragon!_

"Hiccup?"

My eyes snapped open and I sat bolt upright in bed. Or at least, I tried toâ€”the movement was a resounding failure, and I leaned back with a groan as my ribcage ached in protest.

"Hiccup!" another voice said, and I looked up just in time to see my father bearing down on me. The last thing I expected him to do was hug me, but that's exactly what he did, prying me up from the mattress and squeezing me until I squeaked. "Sorry," he said,

sounding sheepish as he released me from his grip, letting me settle back down onto the pillow. In a word, I was stunned. I had never heard my father sound "sheepish" before in my life. "You had me worried there for a bit, son," he told me.

I didn't know what to say, so I looked to the next person in the room—the one who had woken me up. "Good morning, Hiccup," said the tall, rail-thin man. In his hand was a clipboard, upon which he was scribbling furiously. He finished what he was writing, then he hung the clipboard from the end of my bed and circled around to the side opposite my father. "How are you feeling today?"

"Uh, fine, I guess?" I said, "I mean, achy, but not bad."

The doctor frowned, as if that hadn't been the answer he'd been expecting. "Hiccup, do you remember your accident?"

"Vaguely," I said, "It's all sort of fuzzy. Why?"

"Do you remember anything after that? Before today, that is?"

"Uh, no?"

"You don't remember waking up yesterday?" he prodded, and I shook my head.

"No," I said, confused, "I woke up earlier and went back to sleep, if that's what you mean."

"That's not it, son," my dad said, and I turned to give him a questioning look, before the doctor called my attention back to him.

"I'm Dr. Morgan," he said, "I told you that yesterday when you woke up, but it's perfectly fine if you don't remember. Sometimes head injuries like yours can cause some temporary memory loss. But I want you to think, Hiccup. Try to remember."

I did as he said, closing my eyes and trying to remember waking up the day before. Nothing came to mind, so I shook my head and told him once more, "I don't remember."

The doctor sighed. "Traumatic events can also cause memory loss," he explained, though it seemed that now he was speaking to my father rather than me, "It's not uncommon."

"What traumatic event?" I asked, now feeling anxious. Was falling off a cliff not traumatic enough? What the hell else was he talking about? "What happened?"

"You were unconscious for three days, Hiccup. When you got here, you went straight to the O.R., and you were in surgery for approximately thirteen hours," Dr. Morgan told me, "Yesterday you woke up around noontime. You were groggy, but completely lucid."

"Okay," I said as I began to get a bad feeling. Why would I have been in the operating room for so long? A sudden panic gripped my heart, and suddenly I wasn't so sure that I wanted to hear what the doctor had to say.

"Just tell him before I do," my father growled, and I was unbelievably grateful for his presence.

The doctor sighed, looking resignedly at my father. "Hiccup," he said, "The lower portion of your left leg, several inches below the patellofemoral jointâ€"your kneeâ€"was crushed underneath a rock when you fell into that ravine. The O.R. docs did the best they could, but in the end it was decided that the damaged tissue was not salvageable."

My heart began to pound, and I looked to my dad for confirmation of the truth. The way he wouldn't look at me told me everything I needed to know. "Youâ€"you cut off my _leg_?!" I said. I could hear the thin note of panic in my voice, but I didn't care.

"The muscle was already in the beginning stages of necrosis when you arrived, and the bones were shattered beyond repair," he explained a little bit too calmly. "When I told you all of this yesterday you suffered an extreme attack of anxiety that required a sedative to bring under control."

Well, gee, I wonder why; speaking of anxiety, I suddenly felt like I couldn't breathe. I remembered coming to on the floor of the ravine with the wind knocked out of me, and I began to hyperventilate, sucking in more air than I needed to counteract the sudden tightness in my chest. I heard the doctor say something, calling out for help, but then my dad's growling voice forestalled him. "You're not putting him under again, that won't help anything if you keep knocking him unconscious!"

"Butâ€", " Morgan tried to argue, but my dad was no longer listening to him.

"Hiccup," he said, squeezing my shoulder in one of his big, meaty hands, "Son. You'll be fine. This is nothing."

"Dad," I gasped, "they took my _leg_!"

"I know, but you're alive, aren't ya? You're still breathing." I stared at him in disbelief. How could he be so _calm_? I shook my head, trying to slow my breathing as I buried my face in my hands. "That's it," he said to me, "calm yourself. It's all going to be alright." He squeezed me shoulder, then I felt him straighten, "Doctor? May I have a word with you?" I heard them leaving the room, but I didn't look up. _My leg, _I kept thinking, _my leg is gone. They cut it off. They cut off my leg._ Rationally, I knew I was in shock, but the rational part of my brain seemed vastly insignificant at the moment. _What am I going to do without a leg?_ They would stick me in a wheelchair and forget about me.

My mind flashed back to the ravine, and then I remembered seeing the rock. How could I have not known, not realized? But something didn't feel right. I could still feel my leg, underneath the blanket. My foot felt itchy, tingling, but nothing happened when I tried to move it. _He has to be wrong_, I thought. _This is some kind of sick joke. Or I'm dreaming._ Fumbling with one hand, I gripped the edge of the thick hospital blanket and began to throw it back.

Something whispered in the back of my mind, telling me that I should stop, that I didn't really want to see, but I ignored it. I _had_ to

see. My continued sanity counted on it. The blankets were tucked down, resistant, but I flung them off, throwing them away, onto the floor.

Everything in the world seemed to fade away at that moment. I sat on the bed, hearing nothing, seeing and feeling nothing. My whole being was focused on just one thing; the remaining stump of my leg, wrapped tightly in stark, white bandages.

"Hiccup?" The sound of my best friend's voice jolted me out of whatever trance I was in. Slowly, I looked up at the door, saw him standing there with this relieved look on his face.

"My leg," I said weakly, and then he was by my side, pulling the blanket back up and seating himself firmly on the side of the bed. "Jack, my legâ€|"

"I know, buddy."

"How can this be real?"

"It was an accident, Hiccup. Shit happens, y'know?" he said in that blunt way of his, doing his best to be reassuring in spite of everything.

"But _my leg._" A sharp dread stabbed through me, and I realized I was shaking uncontrollably.

"I know."

"Whâ€what am I gonna do?" My voice cracked, my heart palpitating, I could feel another wave of wild panic rising up, threatening to overwhelm me.

"It'll be okay," Jack said, and he sounded so calm, so sure about that that it was all I could do not to shove him away. Instead, I reached out for him, putting my hand on his shoulder, needing to know that he was real and that this really wasn't a dream. The world felt like it was tilting, trying to spin violently out of control, but he wasn't moving. I needed to be grounded, to have something to hold onto before I was thrown into space. "Hey, man, it's alright," he said, looking concerned. "You want me to get the doctor? Your dad was tearing him a new asshole out in the hallway, but I canâ€", "

I shook my head, and he stopped short. "Don't go anywhere," I said. I didn't want to be left alone again. For some reason I was afraid that if he left me again I would suddenly wake up, and be back on the floor of that ravine. "I can'tâ€", " I began, not sure what I was going to say. I couldn't think straight, for one thing. Thoughts popped in and out of my head in a mad rush, things that didn't matter, not that much really did matter right now.

"You know you scared the shit out me," Jack said, drawing my focus back to him, "The whole time I was running, from the second I left you there, I was sure you were already dead. I dunno if you remember, but there was a lot of blood. They told me after that cuts on the head bleed a lot, but that didn't make me feel any better. And your legâ€|It took them forever to get there after I called 911 on the emergency phone. They made me wait down by the access roadâ€you know I was so freaked out that I didn't even stop to take your car? I

couldn't think of where the keys might be, and I figured I could run faster down that bumpy-ass road than your car could drive.

"When they finally got there, they took a thousand years getting up to the ravine, then the rescue chopper took forever. You should have heard me flipping my shit at them. I kept asking like every two seconds if you were still alive, and one of them offered to give me a sedative because I was being so annoying." He stopped there, looking away, sticking his hands into the pocket of his hoodie. Something in his expression seemed cracked, broken. "I really thought you were gonna die," he said without looking at me, "I haven't been home in days, even though they didn't wanna let me in to see you at first. Dude, justâ€¦I'm glad you're alive, okay? That's all I care about." He said this last part decisively, looking back up at me with an earnest look in his eyes.

Without another word he pulled me forward, locking his arms around me, not as tightly as my father had, but then again I don't think anyone could give a hug like my dad can. "Don't you ever pull this shit on me again," he said, voice creaking against the side of my head. I didn't resistâ€¦I gripped him harder in turn with my good arm, resting my head on his shoulder, trying to block out the world. Nothing was okay, but at least Jack was still Jack. He was still here, and he always would be.

"Son." We both jumped when we heard my dad's voice. He had reentered the room, but neither of us had heard him. I looked up at him, saw him look down at Jack and give him a nod. Something seemed to pass between themâ€¦an understanding they hadn't had before. I could only imagine what my father might have said to him while I was still unconscious. "You alright, then?" he said, turning his gaze back to me. I nodded, though it was a lie. My panic was gone, though, replaced by an aching sense of general horror and continued disbelief.

"I'm gonna go give Punz a call," Jack said, clearing his throat awkwardly, "She was here for a while, and she told me to call her as soon as you were awake. Those are from her, by the way." He said, nodding toward something on the other side of the bed. It was shocking that I hadn't noticed the huge vase of bright yellow lilies beforehand, but in light of everything else I guess it was understandable.

Jack left the room, and my father and I were left in silence. A nurse came in after a minute or two and helped me raise the bed so I could sit up more comfortably, and he asked if I needed anything. "No," I told him, my voice sounding hollow in my own ears.

My dad sat back in the same chair he'd been in before. A few times he looked like he wanted to say something, but the moment would pass and he'd turn back to staring at the floor. I wanted to tell him I was glad that he was there, among other things, but I felt too weary to speak, too emotionally overwrought, my thoughts spinning and spinning. Dr. Morgan came in, looking penitent, and began to talk to me, though I didn't pay much attention to what he said. He was giving me a rundown of my injuries, of treatments I'd already had, and treatments I would need. When he got to the subject of my leg, I finally piped up, telling him point blank that I didn't want to talk about that.

"Very well," he said, tight-lipped, and he left the room again.

I must have fallen asleep again shortly after he left, because suddenly I was in the ravine again, only I wasn't pinned under any rocks, or in pain. I was sitting there, feeling like I was waiting for something to happen. The rock I sat on was the same one that had ruined me, but I didn't look down to see if my leg was back to normal. I was perfectly still and silent, staring off into the distance, to the point where the ravine curved and went out of my line of sight. "I saw a dragon!" The voice didn't take me by surprise—in fact, I felt like that was what I'd been waiting to hear. It sounded so familiar, but I couldn't think of a reason why.

Though the voice echoed off the walls of the ravine, I didn't see its owner. Just those words, over and over, and then I felt something. There was something behind me, something big, but I didn't feel afraid. I felt reassured, safe even, as though whatever was there was watching over me. _It laid beside me until help arrived_, I thought, but what was _it_?

My body turned in that unnatural slow-motion way that you move in dreams, and I looked up at the thing behind me. _Big green eyes_, I thought, _big and black and winged_.

I sat up in bed with a gasp, gripping at my pounding heart. "Son?" my dad was still there, coming to the side of the bed with a worried expression, "What is it?"

For a moment I just gaped wordlessly up at him. How could I explain to him that I'd seen a dragon? _It was a dream_, I thought, _I was delusional and in pain. Dragons are extinct_. "Nothing," I said, "Just a—bad dream." But it hadn't been, I thought as I leaned back against the pillows. Not a "bad" dream, anyway. The dragon had been big and dark, but not menacing. In fact, it had almost felt as though it was—protecting me.

Don't be ridiculous, I thought angrily as the rational part of my brain kicked in again. _You had a head injury. You were hallucinating_. Without realizing it, I reached up and touched my cheek, remembering the feel of rough, scaly skin pressed against it. _Just your imagination_, I told myself. What use was it worrying about an imagined—not to mention extinct—animal, when I was down one leg, and trapped in a hospital bed?

Forget about it, I berated myself, pushing away the strange feeling of sorrow that accompanied the thought. _Nobody would believe you anyway_.

4. Chapter 4

"Poor kid. Only nineteen, and he loses his leg in a hiking accident."

"Life just ain't fair sometime."

"You're tellin' me."

"Least he's alive. Coulda been worse."

"True, true, he's a lucky one."

_This is my life now, _I thought bitterly, sitting by the nurses' station in a wheelchair as my uncle and one of my father's friends failed miserably at being discreet not ten feet away from me. At least they were trying, but honestly I couldn't decide what was worse: the sympathy and pity, or the gawkers who looked at me like I was some sort of freak. _I will never get used to this_.

"Hiccup," my cousin said. Earlier he'd called me "Stumpy" in a poor attempt to be casual and funny, but that was the sort of tact I'd come to expect from my extended family members.

"What?" I said, barely keeping the hostility out of my voice. We had never been close, but I'd always tried to be civil toward him. Mostly because he's been twice my size since the day I was born. Despite the fact that I'm sure even _he_ wouldn't stoop to beating up a guy with one leg, old habits die hard.

"What kind of leg do you think they're gonna give you?" he asked, rubbing his stubbly chin musingly.

"I don't know," I said, heaving a sigh. I didn't know, and I didn't care. A fake leg wasn't going to make me feel any less lopsided, or any more whole. It had been two weeks since I'd woken up here in the hospital, and I still couldn't even bear to look at my leg. In fact, I tried to think about it as little as possible, which is quite the feat when you're surrounded by people asking about your missing limb day and night. My initial horror had transmuted into an encompassing feeling of denial, self-loathing, a deep sense of loss, and a thinly veiled fury that made me want to lash out at everything and everyone. So far, I had managed to internalize it all, turn my anger into biting sarcasm, and use the heavy weight of despair as an excuse to sleep as much as possible, therefore avoiding human contact as much as I could.

"You should ask them to give you a hook," my cousin said, barreling through my troubled reverie with all the grace of a bull elephant.

"A hook _foot_?" I scoffed disbelievingly, "Snotlout, they don't even _make_ those."

"You don't _know_ that."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that I _do_ know that nobody makes _hook feet_. They would serve absolutely no functionâ€"you couldn't even walk on one."

"Whatever. You're just jealous that I thought of it first." I had to bite down hard on my tongue to keep from snapping at him. These were the sort of conversations the two of us usually hadâ€"he always manages to engage me in some sort of nonsensical argument, and then gets me so frustrated that I can't even speak. You would almost think that he does it on purpose, but I don't think he's that self-aware.

One of the nurses finally came out from around the back of the counter, my file in hand. "Are we all ready, Hiccup?" she asked with

a smile.

"Oh, yeah," I said flatly, "Ready and raring to go." Today was the day I was going to meet with the prosthetist, who would take my measurements and fit me with a temporary prosthetic. When they had told us how much having one custom-made for me would be, I'd felt a horrible wash of guilt. Even with our insurance, it would cost several thousand dollars. My dad and uncle owned their own auto body shop, sure, but I hated that he would have to spend so much money on me, seeing as how I sure as hell didn't have that kind of cash just lying around.

The nurse grabbed hold of the chair's handlebars, and began to wheel me along. I had to admit, I much preferred having her do it than Snotlout. After an orderly had helped me into the chair, it had been my cousin that had taken me out to wait at the nurses' station. It was only just down the hall, but he'd felt the need to run all the way there for some reason, nearly getting the blanket covering my legs tangled in the wheels and sending me sprawling.

"You don't have to come along, you know," I said to him as he strolled alongside us.

"Dude, I'm your cousin," he protested with a hurt look on his face, "I just want to be here for you." Yeah, right. He just wanted to be here to hit on the "hot babes" as he'd put it. As if he hadn't spent enough of our lives embarrassing the both of us with his "romantic" pursuits. I still hadn't let go of the fact that he'd openly hit on my ex-girlfriend numerous times before and while we were dating, not to mention right in front of me. "How's Astrid, by the way?" was one of the first things he'd asked when he'd dropped by to visit with his father.

We rode down two floors in the elevator, me with my eyes on my hands folded pensively in my lap the whole time. Deep down, I wished my father were here rather than Snotlout, but he'd had to make an emergency business trip. Not far, and not for long, but apparently it wasn't something that my uncle or any of their employees could handle. "Bleeding sot," my father had muttered when he'd told me about one of their more demanding customers needing to meet with him, "Idiot can't comprehend why I wouldn't be able to come personally. My son's only just suffered severe bodily harm. You'll be alright, though, won't ya? Your uncle will keep ya company while I'm gone." If I had asked him to stay, he probably would have, but I'd insisted that he go, told him I would be fine. Some small part of me had been hoping he would tell the guy to go fuck himself anyway, but obviously that hadn't happened.

I chewed my lip as the elevator door opened, twiddling my thumbs as my stomach twisted uncomfortably. There were maybe ten thousand things I would rather be doing at the moment than going to talk to someone I'd never met about acquiring a fake leg. Of course, most of those things also required the use of two legs, so there wasn't much I could do about it. This is stupid, I thought. The whole situation was absurd, and I was still expecting to wake up any second and find out that the whole thing had just been one long, terrible nightmare.

The worst part was that I could still feel my foot. Even though I knew for a certainty that it wasn't there, I could still feel it.

Most of the time it itched maddeningly, and there was nothing I could do to assuage the discomfort. "It could be psychological, or even neurological," Dr. Morgan had explained to me, "and it's also very common. There's even a term for it; 'phantom limb syndrome.'" Having an explanation for it didn't make me feel any better. Particularly when it hurt, rather than itched, which it did more often than I would have admitted to anyone.

Of course, what was actually left of my leg hurt all the time, but at least that was something that would eventually heal, and could be treated with painkillers. My imaginary foot, though, that was something that might never go away, and the thought horrified me almost as much as the fact that I was now short one limb.

"Here we are!" the nurse announced cheerfully after rolling me down a long hallway. I managed to avoid the gazes of the numerous other patients and hospital staff we passed. Every time somebody looked at me I could almost hear what they were thinking: "Oh, that poor kid, he lost his leg. I wonder what happened." I wished I could at least tell them I'd lost it saving orphaned kittens from a burning building or something, but I hadn't even been doing anything dangerous. I had just been walking, and not paying attention to where I put my feet. _Why didn't you look?_ I thought. If I had looked, maybe I could have seen that the rock was loose in the earth. Stupid. So incredibly stupid, I couldn't even speak.

The nurse knocked on the door to an office sporting a plaque that read, "Dr. DunBroch, Prosthetist, Physical Therapist." According to Morgan, she would be handling my treatment from now on, which was a relief. Jack had taken to calling the M.D. "Dr. Douchebag," after he'd gotten a good taste of Morgan's poor bedside manner.

"Come in," a voice called from within, and Snotlout made himself useful by pushing the door open for us.

"Good afternoon, Dr. DunBroch," the nurse said in greeting to a woman seated behind a large desk, piled high with numerous, but perfectly arranged stacks of paper.

"Hello, dears," said the doctor, rising to her feet and striding out from behind her desk. "You're Mr. Haddock, I take it?" she asked, both warmly and businesslike all at once. She had a thick accent, Scottish by the sound of it, like my father, and long, straight brown hair, streaked with grey.

"Yeah," I said, reaching out to shake the hand she offered me with little enthusiasm.

"Well, then, shall we get down to business?" she said, "Thank you for bringing him, lovey."

"No problem, doc," the nurse said, beaming at us as she turned to leave.

"Hey, ah, I didn't get your name," Snotlout said, reaching out to hold the door open for her.

"Oh, it's Andr a," she told him.

"Wow, what a great name. An-dray-uh," he said, and then their voices

faded as he followed her out into the hall and the door swung shut behind them. Figures. He only trailed us down here so he could chat up Nurse "An-dray-uh."

"So, Mr. Haddockâ€", " the doctor began.

"Hiccup," I corrected her automatically, more out of habit than that I actually cared what she called me.

"Hiccup," she echoed, "How are you feeling today?"

"Super," I replied grimly, reaching up to massage my temples. If I had a nickel for every time somebody had asked me how I was feeling over the past few weeks, I'd have enough money to buy ten fake legs.

"Ah now, none of that," she said, pushing my chair closer to her desk and taking a seat on the other side. The nurse had left my chart with her, and she flipped open the folder, perusing my personal medical information as one would normally flip through the morning paper. "I know that you've been through something painful, something most people can't even imagine, but you have to be grateful for all that you still have," she told me. Same shit, different day, I thought, annoyed. If people kept telling me how I should feel as opposed to how I did feel, I was going to start screaming.

To my surprise, rather than getting right down to "business" she started asking me questions that didn't seem to have anything to do with anything relevant to my situation now. "Do you attend university, Hiccup?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I replied succinctly.

"Which one?"

"B.U."

"Oh, my daughter is starting there in the fall," she said, as if I cared, "She's attending the agricultural school."

"That's nice," I said, my tone implying that I didn't give any fucks.

Heedless, she continued on. "We've only lived Stateside for about a year, you see, and she's not very familiar with the city."

"Uh-huh."

"I never would have thought a university in the middle of a city would have an agricultural school," she said, scribbling something on my file as I leaned against the arm of my chair, disinterest plain on my face. "Have you ever been to that part of the campus?"

"No," I said, "It's set pretty far back from everything else." The agricultural buildings were as far separated from the rest of the school as they could possibly be without being off-campus. They had to be, what with the stables, and the greenhouse, and the veterinary clinic, and the giant field they used to exercise the livestock. It was situated at the edge of the city where the suburbs rubbed

shoulders with the skyscrapers, and it had been there long before Berk even became a city. Otherwise, it might have been weird that we even had an agricultural school.

"I visited the campus with her a few weeks ago," she said as if she hadn't heard me, "It's beautiful, but I fear I lost my way more than once."

"Okay."

"Ah, but enough of that. Let's see that leg." She rose again from her chair, and circled back around the desk. After all the poking and prodding I'd been on the receiving end of the past two weeks, I had thought I was finally getting used to it, but boy was I wrong. "Interesting," Dr. DunBroch said as she examined my leg, "Hmm. Yes." I was afraid to ask her what she found so damn "interesting."

Her ministrations made my leg begin to ache, but I grit my teeth and chose a spot on the wall to glare at, hoping she wouldn't notice. "I know it hurts. You're doing well, though. Healing nicely. I've a few prostheses that might fit you."

"Great," I said, watching as she straightened, smoothing her long, green skirt.

"It'll just be a temporary fit, but it's best if you start to learn to walk again sooner rather than later."

"Okay." Finally, my stark responses seemed to get to her, because she gave me this short, level look that made me feel a small twinge of shame. Alright, so it wasn't her fault that I was here, but she didn't have to be so damn chipper about it all.

She sat back at her desk, and began typing up something on her computer—"specifications for my prosthetic, and orders for the temporary one that I would be fitted with when I started physical therapy. "I'll make adjustments to your prosthesis once we begin working together," she told me, "It's not uncommon for it to have to be sent back once or twice, so as to create a better fit. Until then you'll have to make do with the interim one. How does all that sound?"

"Awful," I admitted.

I saw the way her lips pursed, more in thought than consternation, thankfully, and she said, "I know this is difficult, Hiccup. You know the reason why I got into this line of work?"

"No."

"Because of my husband," she said, "He was injured in a hunting accident when we were still quite young, and through helping him overcome his 'disability' I figured out what I wanted to do with my life. So believe it or not, I do know what you're going through, and what you're going to be going through for the rest of your life. It's hard to accept it at first, but you will get used to it."

"How?" I asked her, my voice cracking involuntarily.

"You have to work toward it. I'm not going to lie and tell you that it'll be a piece of cake"it will hurt, and there will be days where you hate me, and hate everything, but in the end you'll be better for it. I promise."

I tore my eyes away from hers, and stared pointedly at the floor. I didn't want to believe it, that I could ever get used to something like this. Nothing in my life would ever be the same, would never be easy. People would always look at me like there was something wrong with me, and they would be right.

When a minute had passed and I didn't respond, I heard her sigh. "Hiccup, has anybody spoken to you about speaking with a psychiatrist?"

A shrink? Oh, God, no. "No, they haven't," I said emphatically. I didn't want that, not even a little. My mind flashed back to my last quarter in school, back to that idiot psych teacher of mine, and I knew I would rather fall off another cliff than have to put up with some smug, psychoanalyzing bastard.

"I know it might not sound appealing, but it helps to have a solid support structure. Good doctors, family, and friends can all be vital to helping you through your recovery." While I continued to sputter, she scribbled something else on my chart. "Just give it a try. If you feel it's not working, you can drop it at any" , "

A rapid, rhythmic knocking sounded at the door, and before the doctor could respond, it swung open, admitting a girl with the most prolific head of curly red hair that I'd ever seen. "Mum," she said, "I need to"oh, hello," she said, giving me a small, awkward wave.

"Merida!" Dr. DunBroch said sharply, standing and leaning forward on her desk, "I'm in the middle of a consultation! I've told you, you can't just barge into my office as you please."

"But I knocked this time," the girl protested, resting her hands on her hips in a show of stubbornness.

"Ugh, outside, please. I'm terribly sorry, Hiccup. Would you give me a moment?"

"Uh"sure?" I conceded, dumbfounded and very much not wanting to be made a spectacle of in front of this girl, who I could only guess was the daughter Dr. DunBroch had mentioned. I watched as the girl heaved a sigh, and about-faced, exiting the office. She was followed shortly by her mother, and I couldn't help but try to hear them through the door.

"Mum, I just" , "

"doesn't matter" "

"but I can't" "

"talk about this _later_" "

Their voices were muffled, but I got the feeling that this was a common occurrence. _Maybe she should get a lock for the door, _I

thought irritably a moment before said door swung open again, readmitting a harried Dr. DunBroch.

"My apologies, Hiccup," she said calmly, despite the circumstances, "My daughter can be a bitâ€¦willful, as you can see." I didn't know what to say to that, so I said nothing. Dr. DunBroch sighed, and then it was back to business, that warm smile back on her face.

An hour later Nurse Andr a reappeared, ready to return me to my room. I was worn out by then from the questions and forced conversation, not to mention all the examining I'd been subject to. We were all the way to the elevator when I heard her gasp, jerking my wheelchair to a stop. "Oh, no! I forgot your file! Just wait here a sec, I'll be right back."

Just go back and get it later, I fumed, twisting around to watch her retreating down the hallway. "Ugh, great," I muttered, briefly contemplating just wheeling myself along, but that seemed like it would take more energy than it was worth. Resigning myself to sitting there conspicuously at the end of the hall, I resumed my study of my hands with little aplomb.

"And my mum says I'm flighty," a familiar, lilting voice said behind me.

Jerking around, I saw that it was herâ€"Dr. DunBroch's daughter, leaning against the wall and watching me with an arched eyebrow. In her hand was a hospital file, which I realized a moment later must be mine. "Mum sent me along with this once she noticed Nurse Airhead had left it behind. Ran right past me she did, and mum's gone on lunch so she'll be tearing the office apart looking for it."

"Shouldn't you tell _her_ that?" I said, giving her a critical look.

"Ah, she'll figure it out," the redhead said flippantly, pushing away from the wall and reaching out for the handlebars on my chair.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking you back to your room. Somebody's got to, right?"

"Uhâ€¦,"

"Room 414, fourth floor," she said, reading the numbers off of my file, "Alright, here we go."

"Are you allowed to do this?" I asked pensively as she pushed me up to the elevator and began jabbing the up arrow.

I saw her shrug, reach up and brush a few errant strands of hair out of her eyes. "It's not against the rules if nobody finds out about it." Well, great. That sounded like something Jack would say, and usually whenever he said something like that we wound up getting in trouble.

"You know, I really don't feel comfortable with you looking at my medical file," I said as she pushed me through the sliding elevators doors. I heard her scoff, and then the file landed in my

lap.

"Please," she said, pressing the fourth floor button, "I've seen worse than missing legs."

"Yeah, alright."

"Boy, being short a leg doesn't even register on the Richter scale of weird shite I've seen. I have three little brothers, plus I've been taking archery and horse-back riding lessons my entire life—I've seen worse," she insisted, leaning over the back of my chair so that some of her hair fell over me in a curtain of red.

"Fine, whatever," I sighed, hoping to imply that I wasn't interested in this topic, at all. I just wanted to get back to my room and go back to sleep.

"You're not very amicable, are you?" she said, and I looked up at her to see that she was grinning, as though this were some sort of joke.

"I'm sorry, should I be?" I shot back venomously.

"Wouldn't hurt," she replied, not rising to the bait.

"Well, forgive me if I don't get up and do a jig for your amusement," I grumbled.

"Hush now, lamb. My little brothers get grumpy too when they haven't had their nap." I might have said something really nasty to that, but just then the doors dinged open, and there stood Jack. He was tapping out something on his phone, but he looked up when the doors slid open.

"Hey, bro," he said, grinning when he saw me. "How'd your leg thing go?"

"Fantastic," I said, unbelievably relieved to see him.

"Really? Good," he stepped aside as the redhead wheeled me out of the elevator, "Who's this?"

"I'm Merida," the girl answered for me, thrusting a hand out for Jack to shake, "My mum is his physical therapist. I was just bringing young Hiccup back to his room."

"Oh, yeah? Well I'll meet you down there. Punz just got here, and I was gonna meet her down in the lobby since you weren't back yet."

No, don't leave me with her, I wanted to shout after him, but it was too late. Merida waved after him as he stepped into the elevator, and the doors slid shut once again.

My uncle had disappeared, as had everyone else who'd come to visit me so far today, so when she wheeled me into my room I was well and truly alone with her. "Come on, up with you," she said, circling to my left and holding out her hand to help me up.

"Uh, maybe you should get an orderly," I suggested

hesitatingly.

"Please, I'm stronger than I look," she said with a roll of her eyes, "I told you, I'm an archer." Seeing as how I was left with little recourse until Jack returned, I reluctantly let her sling my arm up over her shoulder, and help me get back up in my bed. She was right about being stronger than she looked, but that didn't mean the whole thing didn't make me feel weird.

"Soâ€¦thanks," I said awkwardly.

"You're welcome!" she chirped. I had assumed that she would leave once I was safely back abed, but unfortunately I was wrong. Instead of bidding me goodbye and going off on her merry way, she walked over to the side of my bed and began nosing about through my things. "These are lovely," she said, indicating the fresh flowers Rapunzel had brought me. Her mother owns a flower shop, so I was kept in ready supply, though I'd told her it wasn't necessary.

"I don't mean to be rude," I said, frowning after a few seconds of watching her reading cards sent by my various friends and co-workers, "but do you not have something else you need to be doing?"

"Nope," she replied matter-of-factly, "I've got to wait for my dad to come pick me up. I told him I could take the bus, but mum gets so antsy about me wandering the city 'alone.'" She rolled her eyes and set the card she'd been reading back on the table. "You don't mind, do you?" The question was slightly belated, and I was about to tell her that yes, I did mind having a total stranger poking through my personal effects when Jack and Rapunzel arrived.

"Hiccup!" Rapunzel sang, skipping across the room and throwing her arms around me, "How are you feeling today, sweetie?"

"Wonderful," I grunted, "Jack, did youâ€¦?"

"Yeah, I brought you your stuff," he said, slinging his pack off his shoulders. "I'm surprised it took you this long to ask, dude." The day before when I had been telling him about my appointment today, Jack had made an offhand remark, something like, "I don't see why you just don't make your own leg, man. You're a genius; you could probably whittle one out of a block of wood. Or at the very least, model one on your computer." Honestly, I had considered the same thing, but it had only been a fleeting thought. I was too disheartened to attempt such a thingâ€¦designing my own fake leg just seemed like a really depressing activity. Maybe one day I would try, but the comment about my computer had reminded me of something else I needed to do.

"Thanks," I said, reaching out as he fished my laptop out of his bag.

"Who's this?" Rapunzel asked politely, echoing Jack's question from earlier as she noticed Merida for the first time. Surprisingly, the redhead had retreated to the window when my friends had entered the room, as if now she suddenly worried that she was intruding.

"Merida DunBroch," she said, striding forward to greet Rapunzel, "My mother is Hiccup's physical therapist."

"Ohhhh," Rapunzel said, smiling, "It's nice to meet you! Hiccup, you didn't tell us you made a new friend."

"Oh, we've only just met," Merida explained. A startled look crossed her face, and she reached down into the pocket of her jeans, retrieving her vibrating phone. "Ah, my dad's here, I've got to go. It was nice meeting you all!"

"You too!" Rapunzel called after her as she raced out of the room. "She seems nice," she said, turning and hopping up onto the edge of my bed.

"You only talked to her for two seconds," I scoffed, yanking open my laptop as Jack took the chair usually reserved for my dad.

"Don't be so cynical, Hiccup," she chided.

"Yeah, Hic," Jack said in a high-pitched imitation of Rapunzel's voice, "Don't be so cynical. Ow!" Rapunzel kicked him and he yelped, grinning as he rubbed his shoulder.

"So, how was your appointment?" Punz asked, a note of sympathy creeping into her tone.

"Depressing," I answered, distracted by the comforting blue glow of my loading screen. How long had it been since I'd been online? My internet friends probably thought I was dead by now.

"Hey, did I tell you?" Jack said, sitting sideways on his chair, "There was some reporter downstairs asking about your accident."

"A reporter?" I snorted in surprise, "What, did they run out of news or something?"

Jack laughed, and Punz sighed, "It's called a human interest story, Hiccup. Humans are typically interested in other humans, you know."

"What's a human? Ow, don't hit me, I'm injured!"

"Please, that was just a little love-tap," she said, flexing her arm threateningly.

"You didn't tell them anything, did you?" I asked once I had recovered, slightly alarmed by the prospect of my accident becoming a widespread topic of discussion.

"No," Jack said, "I heard her asking, and I told her you were still in a coma."

"Oh, gee, thanks."

"No prob, bro."

The two of them hung around for a few hours while I played with one of my 3D modeling programs, pretending to be fiddling with designs for a prosthesis, though I really didn't have the heart for it. Nor did I have access to appropriate materials, the expensive polymers and stainless steel that would work better than the types of things I could get my hands on at my dad's shop or the hardware store where I

wasn't sure if I still worked or not.

Rapunzel filled the hours with her usual upbeat chatter, filling me in on the summer music program she'd been taking, and Jack said that my dad had fixed his busted car for free, which I had already known about. "Do you guys think I should cut my hair?" Punz asked at one point, twirling the end of her thick, blonde ponytail between her fingers.

"Why would you do that?" Jack asked, bewildered.

"Why would you dye your hair to look like an old man?" she shot back teasingly, "It's just _so_ _long_, and I haven't cut it in _forever_."

"Oh, is this 'cause of that Flynn guy?" Jack said, making a disgusted noise and rolling his eyes.

"_No_."

"Who's Flynn?"

"Nobody!"

"He's her new _boyfriend_."

"Oh, Jack, shut _up_."

"Is he handsome?"

"Oh, _super_ handsome."

"Jack!"

"What? He is," Jack said with a shrug, "And he's been trying to get Punz to punk up her look. He wants her to sing for his band."

"Okay, okay," she admitted, "Maybe it is because of Flynn, but also because I'm sick of dealing with _this_—" she said, waving her hands wildly around her head, "—every day."

"Well, babe, I'll support you no matter what," Jack promised with mock seriousness. She looked like she might have kicked him again, but she froze, foot in mid-swing as her gaze locked on the door to my room. "Hello," she said, lowering her foot as Jack and I looked up to see who was here now.

My eyes fell on the girl who stood in the doorway, and the entire world seemed to freeze. _Oh_.

"Astrid," Jack said, recovering more quickly than me, "Hey. I didn't know you were back in town."

"I—" she started, wringing her hands, looking very nervous and un-Astrid-like as she hesitated in the doorway, "I just got back, and—my parents told me last night. I hadn't heard until then—" she trailed off.

Rapunzel, upon hearing the name "Astrid" and realizing what was going on, slid down to the floor and took Jack by the arm. "Let's go for a

walk, Jack,"

"But,"

"Come on, I want a Slush Puppy," she insisted, tugging his hand and leading him out of the room. He tossed me an apologetic look over his shoulder, and pursed his lips as he passed Astrid, looking like he wanted to say something but for once managing to hold his tongue. I could understand why he might not want to leave me alone with her, and I could only imagine what he'd told Punz, but Jack tends to blow things out of proportion.

As soon as they were gone, Astrid let her arms drop to her sides, and she walked slowly over to the edge of my bed. "So," she said.

"You look different," I blurted, eliciting a small smirk from her. She did look different, though. Her hair was done in elaborate braids, rather than the single one she used to wear, and she was tanned from living under the everlasting California sunshine. And she looked—I dunno, older? Wiser? Something like that.

"Hiccup," she said after a moment, "I can't believe this happened to you." She reached out and rested a hand on my shoulder. "It's just—ugh, it's total bullshit!" There she was, the Astrid I knew. She turned from me, glaring off at nothing in particular.

"Agreed," I said, and she turned back, smiling again, though now she looked like she might cry. Astrid only cries when she's absolutely furious, though, and there's nothing she can take her frustration out on physically.

We were silent for a few minutes that stretched out interminably, the quiet strained for lack of words. Though I wasn't surprised that she had come to see me, I also wasn't really sure how I felt about it. When we had broken up the year before, after two years of dating, I had wallowed in devastation for weeks afterward. Astrid had been my first real girlfriend, the first girl I had ever even kissed, and then she had announced rather abruptly that she was going to school out of state, throwing me completely for a loop. I had been too good a boyfriend to ask her to stay, knowing that if I did it would be purely for selfish reasons, and she had been very suddenly dead set on getting out of Berk, of escaping from her parents' then ongoing divorce. As far as I knew, they still hadn't settled things, but they'd stopped fighting long enough to break the news about me, I guess.

Part of the reason why Jack was always so insistent on me going out and finding a new girl to occupy my time was because he had seen the aftermath of it all. We had had one of the only serious fights of our friendship after he had gone on a rant about Astrid not being worth my time anyway—I had hurt my hand pretty badly punching him in the face over it. It struck me as sort of funny that Astrid didn't know anything about that, and probably never would. She had told me almost a year ago to the day that it would be best if we just stayed friends—that long distance relationships never worked out anyway, and we would each be better off finding someone new. At the time, she'd seemed strangely distant, which I could understand. That was how she handled any emotions that weren't anger, but it had made me feel like total shit nonetheless.

Finally, she sighed, reaching out and taking my hand. I still had my laptop open, but I'd set it to the side, forgetting it for a moment. "I'm so sorry, Hiccup," she said voice steady despite the furious look in her eyes, "Iâ€"ugh, I'm sorry for everything. What happened last year, and not talking to you for so long, and nowâ€", she made a helpless gesture, and hung her head with an aggrieved noise.

"Astrid, Iâ€", " I didn't know what to say to her, but for some reason I was angry. I had thought I was over it all, but maybe the stress of my injury, and being surrounded by people telling me they were "sorry" just compounded everything together, making it all seem worse in retrospect. "I think it's time for my medication," I said evasively. It wasn't a lieâ€"they'd been pumping me full of all sorts of drugs, mostly painkillers and antibiotics, some of which I had to take orally.

"Oh," she said, taken aback. As if on cue, one of the nurses strode into the room, pushing a cart laden with medications for the various patients on that floor.

"Hiccup Haddock," she said, reading my name off a chart she held as she handed me a small white cup, and a larger cup full of water, "Here you are my good sir."

"Thank you," I mumbled, avoiding eye contact with Astrid as I downed the pills.

"Oh, visiting hours are over in twenty minutes, miss, just so you know," the nurse said on her way out.

"That's fine," Astrid said, tone stiff, "I was just leaving." As soon as the words left her mouth, I felt guilt come crawling up my throat in the form of an apology, but she was already sweeping out of the room. With a fierce sense of chagrin I choked back the wordsâ€"what good would it do, anyway? Would it make everything all better between us? Would it magically regrow my foot if I apologized to everybody for being such a dick? No. I knew I was making excuses, but I didn't care.

I grabbed my laptop, tapping the spacebar in frustration until the screensaver disappeared. Now that I was alone I could do what I'd been planning to do all along. I opened up Google and typed into the search bar "dragon species of the Northeastern United States."

5. Chapter 5

****I love you guys.****

x

Physical therapy was painful.

No, let me rephrase that: physical therapy was balls to the walls fucking excruciating. By the end of the first day I was wishing that Jack had just left me to die in that ravine, a thought that I shared with Dr. DunBroch in my delirium. Apparently my demeanor thus far hadn't clued her in to the fact that I'm an unrelenting,

self-deprecating smartass, because no sooner had I returned to my hospital room than a nurse came in and told me I had an appointment the next afternoon with one of the hospital psychologists.

With a groan, I sat back in my bed, pressing the heels of my palms against my eyes. Every part of me hurt, even the parts that hadn't been injured in my fall. My ribs ached, throbbing where they'd been fractured, and so did my still-broken fingers. My left shoulder had been dislocated, and now it felt sore, along with every other muscle and ligament in my body. Of course, my leg was the worstâ€"it burned, tingling with pins and needles, my phantom foot itching so fiercely that I wished I could cut it off again. Anything to make it stop.

In short, I was miserable, and the last thing I wanted to do was talk to a psychiatrist. Dr. DunBroch had supposedly been "taking it easy" on me, but it sure as shit didn't feel that way. First she had made me do a lot of awkward stretching to warm up my bed-ridden muscles, then she'd strapped one of the standby prosthetics to my leg and thrown me right into "walking." Of course what walking for me really was, was hobbling between two handhold bars on a soft mat that was supposed to make putting pressure on my leg easier (spoiler alert: it didn't).

For my first physical therapy session I'd done a lot more falling over than actual walking, but the Good Doctor had of course assured me that that was perfectly normal. "This is a process that takes time," she had told me, dressed like a high school soccer coach rather than a doctor, smiling down at me while I caught my breath in the of corner the physical therapy center. Being in there, surrounded by other people who had been maimed, people who could no longer function like they once had, did admittedly make me feel slightly less pathetic. But only by a slim margin.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand next to my bed, and I reached for it, cringing as my overtaxed muscles protested. I saw I had a stack of messages from Jack; neither he nor Rapunzel had been able to come visit me that day. Jack had had to work, and Rapunzel had been at her music program. Now Jack was set to go have dinner with her parents, and he had apparently been trying to pester me about it for half the day.

****Dude I have never done this b4**, one text said, **omfg what am I even sposed to wear?****

****They r gonna hate me****

****Y dafuq did I dye my hair white I look like a jackass****

****Do u think they'll hate me?****

****I'm crying in Walgreens y is hair dye so expensive****

****Fuck it I'm not dying my hair back they have to like me for me****

****That sounded rly stupid I am a shit there not gonna like me****

Sorry, I was in therapy**** _-** , I sent him. _**Stop freaking out, you'll be fine. And learn to spell.**_**

****Fuck u****

They're not going to like you if they find out you have such poor textual syntax. ****

****Idefk wut that means u r not helping. How was therapy btb?****

I wish I was dead.****

****Boohoo at least u don't have to have dinner w ur gf's parents. All u did was lose a leg ****

Very funny, Frost.****

****Wut can I say I'm a regular louis ckâ€|lol that rhymed****

You are a moron. ****

****Ilu gtg finish getting rdy Punz says u a punk****

****I didn't say that, I said I'm sorry your therapy made you feel crappy. Don't worry, I'll pinch him really hard for you 33 (this is Rapunzel in case you couldn't tell xD)****

Thanks. Have fun guys. ****

I set my phone down as I was struck with a strange sinking feeling. To my surprise, it took me a moment to recognize the feeling as one of loneliness. Once upon a time, I would have called the sensation familiar, would have known it in an instant for what it was. Then I had met Jack, and he had spent years bludgeoning the loneliness out of me with his relentless brand of friendship. There had never been a time when he'd given up on me, even when I'd tried to tell him I preferred being alone. Sometimes I did, but a lifetime of being alone, of building up a wall to shelter myself from disappointment, from abandonment, from friendship and human contact, would have destroyed me in the end. I knew that now, and Jack had known it all along.

So why did I feel so lonely now?

I didn't need a shrink to figure it out, that was for sure. I was lonely because I was stuck in a hospital bed. I was lonely because I had literally lost a part of myself that I could never get back. I was lonely because my best friend was meeting the parents of the girl he was probably going to marry, and I couldn't be there to tease him about it. Not to mention the fact that my father was still out of town, and the only company I'd had all day was the brooding empathy of my fellow amputees down in the P.T. center.

I'm an amputee. The thought entered my mind like a blade through the ribs. It was the first time I'd put the words together into a cohesive sentence, the first time I'd thought of myself in that way, and it curdled, festering and dark as my fingers curled into the bed-sheets. There was nobody here this time to reassure me, nobody to help me regain my calm as the panic attack rolled in like a thunderhead. Later somebody told me that the attack was so bad that they had thought it was my heart giving out, and it had certainly felt that way.

Hospital staff surrounded me, as if from nowhere, and somebody gave me a sedative, which I resisted, futilely of course. It calmed me, but didn't put me under, so I understood when Dr. Morgan asked if I wanted them to call someone for me. "No," I said, my voice feeling thick on my tongue, "There's no one to call." That earned me some odd looks, but I didn't care. I told them all to leave me alone, and they did. I somehow managed to roll onto my side, pulling the blanket up over my head, effectively creating a cocoon that did more to calm my spinning mind than the drugs.

Think about something else, I told myself sluggishly, trying to push thoughts of my broken body out of my mind. _Think about the dragon_.

I seized upon the topic, curling in on myself like I had when I was little, terrified of monsters under my bed, but equally afraid of calling upon my father for help. He would only ever tell me that the monsters weren't real, and then leave me in the darkness to fend for myself. _The dragons,_ I thought, _they were real. They were. You saw one, too._ Had it been real, though, or something conjured up while I was reeling from pain?

I still couldn't decide, but I had at least tried to find out. After Astrid had left the previous night, I'd spent hours online, trying to find a dragon that looked like the great dark beast from my dreams. "Dragons, huh?" Jack had said, nearly startling me into dropping my laptop when he appeared at my side. I had forgotten all about him and Rapunzel, and I'd been so distracted by my research that I hadn't noticed their return. When they had asked what happened with Astrid, I'd told them that she'd had to go take care of something. By the looks they exchanged, I could tell that they knew I was lying, but neither of them pressed me.

Dragons, Hiccup. Focus. Even if I hadn't seen a dragon, I'd certainly seen _something_. Visual hallucinations were one thing, but physical sensations were another. Something had touched me, pressed its nose against my face. I could still feel its hot breath, the moisture from its lungs, the wild, musky scent of it. Even in my most vivid dreams and my worst nightmares I'd never managed to conjure up anything even half so _real_.

Something else about it bothered me, too. There was an underlying feeling of familiarity to all of this. A sense that I knew something about it that I couldn't quite recall. _I saw it! I saw a dragon_.

It was that voice I kept hearing, that little kid. It tickled something in the back of my mind, something that insisted I _knew_ that voice. I'd heard it in my dreams, whenever the dragon appeared, vague and shadowy as it was. So far, I hadn't found one that felt right, one that matched the dark shape, giant cat's eyes, and bat-like wings. There were a few that were close, like the skrill, but there had been hundreds of different types of dragons, and I hadn't been able to look through them all. A nurse had come into my room and made me shut my laptop down, insisting that I "get some rest" as if I hadn't had plenty of that lately.

If my body hadn't currently felt like it was weighted down with rocks, I might have pulled my laptop out and resumed my search. As it

was, the sedative was steadily taking its toll, working its way through my bloodstream and twisting my thoughts into a meaningless stream of confusing images.

I saw it! The voice echoed through my mind, but I couldn't respond.

I saw a dragon! So what? I did too, big whoop.

Daddy, I saw it!

You saw what, Hiccup?

I saw a dragon!

X

My eyes creaked open, and I sat up with a groan. My body still felt heavy, still ached, but the sedative had worked its way out of my system. Thin grey light filtered through the drawn blinds, but when I looked at my phone I saw it was close to noon. Weatherbug told me that it was just an overcast day outside, which explained why it was so dark in my room.

"Ah, good, you're awake!" the familiar voice of the head nurse said as she poked her head into the room, "I'm told you have an appointment with Dr. Sanderson this afternoon."

Oh, right, the shrink, I thought moodily as one of the cafeteria workers wheeled in my belated breakfast. Ever since I'd woken up here my appetite had been rather lacking, but I ate what they gave me just to avoid having to deal with, well, people who thought I needed to talk to a psychiatrist. So I guess that didn't exactly pan out for me.

"Is this really necessary?" I muttered as I was helpedâ€"forcibly movedâ€"into yet another wheelchair.

"Doctor's orders," the nurse on duty for the day tutted. _God forbid we defy such lofty orders_, I thought bitterly.

Dr. Sanderson's office wasn't as far away as Dr. DunBroch's; just one floor down, and it was cozier by far. There were numerous potted plants scattered about the untidy little room, a well-used sofa, and a shelf stocked with books of all kinds. That didn't make me like being there any better, though.

The doctor himself was a small, round man who spoke very little in comparison to how much everybody else seemed to natter on at me lately. He bustled into the room a minute after I was left there, dressed in a worn tweed suit, his swept back hair a messy, sandy blond. "Hiccup Haddock the Third," he said, voice soft and soothing, "That's an interesting name."

"I know," I said in a tone that indicated I didn't want to get into it. Unlike most people I'd met lately, he took the hint.

Instead of jumping right into it and asking me how I was feeling, he asked me to tell him about myself. "What sort of things do you like doing?" he said, "And what _would_ you like to do, in the future?" If

anything, these were the types of questions I hated answering more than any other. When I interviewed for jobs and my prospective employers asked me to tell them about myself, I always wound up drawing a blank. Dr. Sanderson wasn't nearly as intimidating as they usually were, though.

"I dunno," I said cagily, determined to make this my first and last visit to his office.

"Oh, come now, you know yourself better than anyone," he insisted.

What did I like doing? I liked to draw, and I liked to read. I liked to take naps, and I liked animals, and writing, and being with my friends, and being by myself. _I liked having two legs_, I thought with grim humor, but I decided that wasn't the sort of thing I should say to a psychiatrist.

"I like quiet," I told him. It was true, after all. As much as the hospital staff tried to keep things calm, the place was never truly quiet. There was always someone coughing, people hustling about, and there was a creepy robot that delivered medicine to certain patients late at night and scared the shit out of me. Not to mention the constant steady beeping of medical equipment.

I missed my bedroom. My apartment. My roommate, and my neighbors. Sure, some of them could be noisy, but at least the noises they made were normal. There was no overhanging pall of death and sickness in my apartment building. How was I going to go back to that once I got out of here? Everyone would forget about Hiccup, that quiet guy who would fix your busted television set for free, in lieu of Hiccup, that poor kid that lost his leg.

"Headache?" the doctor asked, and I realized I was rubbing my head again.

"No," I lied, letting my hand drop into my lap.

"Stress is a funny thing," he said to me, "it can manifest itself as physical pain, as weight loss, sleeplessness, depression, or a combination of each."

"I'm notâ€¦" I was going to say I wasn't depressed, but that was probably not true. "I don't want to be put on any more medication."

"Of course," he agreed.

"I also don't want to be here."

"Obviously," he said with a knowing grin.

"Furthermore, I think your entire profession is a joke."

"Ah, hostility, that's original."

"And if this is your method of analyzing me, then it behooves me to inform you that it sucks," I told him dryly.

"Well spoken," he said thoughtfully. "Dr. DunBroch tells me that

you're sullen and listless, and occasionally combative. She usually has a good sense for these things, but here's what I thinkâ€”I think you're using this broody faÃ§ade as a method of allaying your own fears for the future. By pretending that you don't care, you're protecting yourself from fully accepting the truth of your condition."

"Wow, you got all that from three whole sentences?" I said with feigned amazement.

"That, and from what others have told me. I do have a full record of your stay here, you know," he said, tapping that stupid file of mine. I had a sudden mad impulse to seize it from his desk and tear it to shreds, but again, that didn't seem like the sort of thing I should do in front of a shrink.

"Look, doc, I really don't know what you want me to say here," I told him, feeling ragged, "Should I cry and tell you my daddy never loved me? Do you want to do some ink blot tests and try to figure out how crazy I am by what I think I see in them?"

"Combateness, again. Dr. DunBroch was right."

"Alright, are we done yet, because this is getting old."

"Why Hiccup, I'm hurt. I thought we were really getting somewhere," he said, "Come now, you've had plenty of visitors. Why don't you tell me about your friends, and your family?"

"I'd rather not," I grumbled. I didn't even want to think about my family much at the moment, and my friendsâ€”

"Alright, then. What about your accident? Would you like to talk about that?"

"_No_," I said. The longer he continued to be reasonable, the more annoyed I became. The session already felt like it was going in circles, and I had only been there for about fifteen minutes.

"Well, we could always just sit here and stare at each other for the rest of the hour," he mused.

I loosed a long-suffering sigh, leaning my head back and glaring up at the ceiling. Alright, if that's how he was going to be. "I fell off a cliff," I told him, "I stepped on a loose rock, and I fell into a ravine, and the rock landed on my leg. That's really all there is to it."

"You were left there alone for a while, weren't you? That must have been frightening."

I frowned, brow furrowing in frustration. Talking about my feelings wasn't something I was good at, not with the father I'd grown up with. Not even when I had a friend like Jack, but telling him things was a lot easier than telling them to a relative stranger.

"Yeah, it was scary as shit," I agreed, "I was worried I might get eaten by aâ€”"

"A what? Hiccup?"

"Dragon," I whispered distractedly, too low to be understood, then more audibly, "I saw a dragon."

"I'm sorry, did you say _dragon_?"

"What? No," I denied, snapping back to reality and sitting up straight in my chair, tearing my gaze away from the ceiling. _Daddy, I saw a dragon! _The voice rang in my head, and I winced, reaching up again to rub my temples. How could I have forgotten? The voice was _mine_. Everything else was foggy, but that I knew now with a certainty.

"Hiccupâ€", "

"You know what, I _do_ have a headache," I said truthfully. My head had begun to pound, and no amount of massaging was going to help the pain. Dr. Sanderson, appearing alarmed by the sudden onset of the malady, called a nurse, and I was taken back to my room and given a strong painkiller. Stress was the cause, he'd insisted. _Yeah, and whose fault is that?_ I thought, but I supposed if it wasn't for his prodding I might not have remembered my revelation from the night before.

I _had_ seen a dragon before. Or I had thought I'd seen one. I remembered being an imaginative child, the type of kid that would sit in the backyard and make up stories about the different types of bugs he saw, and wander aimlessly around the neighborhood, ignoring the other children, lost in his own little world.

No more than an hour had passed and my headache had dulled, when I was told that it was time again for physical therapy. _Does the torment never cease?_ I wondered. I hadn't even gotten a chance to take my laptop out again.

Dr. DunBroch was certainly cheery as ever when she saw me. "Hiccup," she said, "Oh, my boy you look pale. Are you feeling well?"

"I had a headache, but it's fine," I told her. There was no use feigning illâ€if I put off physical therapy for one day, it wouldn't make a difference. I'd just be back here again tomorrow. The thought of quitting never really crossed my mind, despite how painful it all was. My father would never let me quit, for one, and it would be worse if I just gave up anyway. How would people look at me if they knew I hadn't even tried? It wasn't that I was determined to overcome my new disabilityâ€it was more like something I had simply resigned myself to, because I had no other choice.

I covered my eyes wearily as the doctor strapped the prosthetic to my leg. First she wound a bandage around my damaged appendage, padding to make up for the fact that the prosthetic didn't quite fit the way it should. It still felt weird, thoughâ€cold, and stiff. Unnatural. I cringed when I felt it slide into place. "There we are," she said, "Up we go, now." I was taller than her, but then I'm taller than most everybody so I'm used to it. She handed me a set of crutches, and told me that she wanted me to start using them, and the leg, all of the time. "The fastest way to adapt is through constant use," she said.

"My leg already hurts," I informed her. The weight of the false leg

strained my still healing limb, and made balancing difficult.

"The crutches will give you added support outside of this room. Once you can move around easily with them, it will be that much simpler to transition to the leg alone." So that's what we did. I'd never used crutches before, aside from the few times one of my friends sprained an ankle, or broke a foot and let me play with theirs for fun. It was a lot different when you weren't able to ditch them after a while, though. Despite the (useless) padding, they made my armpits hurt, and my good leg began to tire. "Don't just leave your other leg out entirely, Hiccup, that's notâ€”alright, forget the crutches for now. Let's try the bars some more, shall we?"

I grated my teeth, and hobbled over to the support bars. How many more months of this was I supposed to endure, exactly?

An hour later I was exhausted. I sat down heavily on one of the mats as Dr. DunBroch knelt down and handed me a glass of water. "You're doing well," she told me with a smile.

"Really, because I feel like microwaved shit," I huffed.

She laughed, covering her mouth as she did so, "Oh, my well, that's a rather colorful descriptive, isn't it? Don't worry, it'll get easier soon. This is only our second try, after all." She said "our" like I wasn't the one doing all the work. Was standing by, holding my arm and telling me how to move my legs really all that difficult? "Well, if it's any consolation," she said when I gave no response, "I think you're doing well enough to be released soon."

"How soon?" I asked, not daring to hope.

"Within the next few days, hopefully," she said, "There haven't been any complications with your leg, and as long as you keep up with your treatmentsâ€”" Oh, that meant continuing physical therapy, and going to see the head shrinker. Well, fine. I could deal with that, if it meant I could finally get the hell out of here. I hadn't been outside in days, and I was tired of breathing in the antiseptic hospital air.

Just as Dr. DunBroch was offering me a hand up, the door to the center swung open and in strode the last person I was expecting to seeâ€”her daughter. "Hi, mum!" she said brightly, and I noted with some alarm that she was dressed in hospital scrubs.

"You're late," Dr. DunBroch scolded, reaching up and accepting her daughter's hug nonetheless.

"Oh, mum," she sighed, "If you didn't insist on me being chauffeured everywhere, I could actually get to where I'm supposed to be on time." Her mother opened her mouth, probably to argue, only to be cut off by a loud, insistent beeping.

"That's my pager," she said, sighing as she looked down at the archaic device, "Be back in a moment, Hiccup. I've got to take this. Meridaâ€”behave." I caught the way Merida rolled her eyes at this directive, though her mother didn't.

"Honestly, I can't do anything," she said, heaving a sigh as she sauntered over to me and plopped herself down onto the mat by my

side.

"Is there a reason you're here?" I asked her, and she shot me a dirty look.

"I volunteer at the hospital, you numpty," she explained, "Thus, why I was here yesterday. My shift just ended when I barged in on you and mum."

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh.' You don't have to be so surly all of the time, you know. It's very cliché," she said, pulling her knees up to her chin and wrapping her arms around them.

"So I'm told," I said, remembering the way Dr. Sanderson had zeroed right in on me, wholly unimpressed by my abrasive attitude.

"How is your leg, by the way? I heard what happened to you. Through the grapevine, as it were."

"It's peachy," I said sarcastically, "Feels great, y'know, having part of your body crushed by a giant rock." She ducked her head and laughed, and I realized I'd spoken without the usual ire that tinged my words of late.

"I'm sure," she said. "Does it hurt much?"

"What do you think?"

"Well, here, let's see," she said, rocking forward onto her knees and reaching for my leg.

"What? Wait. No!"

"Relax, lambkins, I know what I'm doing. You think I grew up with a mum who's a physical therapist without learning a few things?"

"Uhâ€¦,"

"And I am an athlete, remember? I know how to treat injuries. I qualified for the Olympic archery team when I was sixteen, and I've been in God knows how many jumping and driving competitions with my horses," she explained as she shifted around, taking hold of my prosthetic and pulling it gently into her lap.

"The Olympics?" I said, impressed in spite of myself, "Really?"

"Yeah, I only won silver though, because I strained my shoulder the night before the competition."

"Y-you actually were in them?"

"Yeah," she shrugged, as if it were no big deal.

I felt her fingers kneading into my flesh, but I paid it no mind. "So, wait, how old are you now?"

"Eighteen," she said, "Just had my birthday."

"Are you going to compete again?"

"Nah. I love archery, but I can't stand the hoity-toity competitive typesâ€"especially when they're pitching a fit over the fact that I just beat them fair and square." She pressed something in my leg that made me hiss and twist around uncomfortably on the floor. "Sorry," she said, but the pain was already fading.

"It's fine," I told her, waving a hand dismissively, "Iâ€|um, what were we talking about?"

"Archery." She grinned, and I realized that my "foot" was in her lap, and her fingers were working into my healing muscles, seeking out the aches and soothing them away. In other words, it was incredibly awkward for me. "So, what do you like to do, Hiccup?"

"I, ah, I likeâ€|writing."

"Oh? What do you write?"

"Oh, well, I don'tâ€|I meanâ€|I'm not very good."

"I'm sure that's not true. What else?"

"Um, I draw."

"And I suppose you're not very good at that either?" she asked with a teasing smile.

Astonishingly, I was feeling less uncomfortable with each passing second. It's not really difficult to overcome awkwardness when you're talking to somebody who is intentionally goading you, after all. "Actually, I think I'm a better artist than a writer. I mostly do technical drawing, though."

"Like architecture?"

"Yeah, and engineering. I use a lot of Inventor and AutoCAD," I explained, "But I draw other stuff, sometimes."

"Like what?"

"Justâ€|whatever I see."

"Could you draw me?"

"Oh, I dunno." I'm always discomfited when people ask me this, even though it's where the conversation of art invariably leads. It's not just that people are difficult to drawâ€"and they areâ€"but it's hard for me to draw them as they really are without feeling like they won't like the end result, and wind up saying something like, "Is that how you think I look?" Punz is way better at drawing people than I am. Her work is far more stylized than mine, which makes her subjects appear less realistic and more fantastical.

"I've always wanted a boy to draw me. Like Leo DiCaprio in Titanic. Draw me like one of your French girls, Hiccup," she said, throwing her arm up over her head dramatically, then giggling so I couldn't

tell if she was being serious or not.

"I don't have anything to draw with here," I hedged, deciding that it was unlikely I would see much of her once I was out of the hospital anyway.

"Aw, well, maybe another time," she sighed. I realized her hands had stopped moving, and now she was just sitting there, resting them on my leg. "Want to try walking now?" she asked before I could say anything about it.

"Okay." If it meant an end to the disconcerting nearness of our bodies, then I was all for it.

Unbelievably enough, my leg didn't hurt half as badly as it had before. I couldn't lean fully on it, but it wasn't as painful to totter along between the bars. When Dr. DunBroch returned and saw me walking without doctoral supervision she nearly had apoplexy, but for some reason I told her it had been my idea. "My leg felt better, and I was bored," I said with a shrug.

"Well, next time wait for me, dear," she reprimanded gently, "You could have done more harm to yourself than good."

"Sorry," I told her, and she seemed surprised that my tone wasn't laced with resentment.

When I got back to my room, I found I had more texts from Jack, and a voicemail from my dad. He informed me concisely that he would be back the next day, and that he hoped I was doing well. "Yeah, just ducky," I muttered as I deleted the message.

****Hey dude can I come by tonite?**** Jack wanted to know

****U didn't answer so I'm assuming u r either dead or u left ur phone in ur room it is going to get stolen u kno****

****Fuck it I'm coming to c u deal w it****

The last message was time-stamped from just a few minutes ago, and knowing Jack's driving habits, he would probably be there soon.

"Oh my god, Hiccup," he groaned as he entered the room, not ten minutes later.

"It went that badly, huh?" I asked.

"No, dude. They loved me," he said, expression one of sheer horror, "They want me to go on vacation with them."

"And that's bad?"

"It's awful! I have to act normal in front of these people for a whole week, man. Jesus Jones, I mean they're like the Brady Bunch, and I'm Cousin It." He sagged down in the chair next to my bed, and loosed a sigh. "But enough about me. How was your day?"

I opened my mouth to tell him everythingâ€”about my panic attack the night before, and my terrible appointment with Dr. Sanderson, and about the dragonsâ€”But I didn't. If I told him about the panic

attack, he'd feel guilty for not being there. If I told him about seeing a shrink, he'd be worried, and if I told him I'd seen a dragon, or that I might have hallucinated one, wellâ€¦

"Ah, same old," I said tiredly, "I just got back from physical therapy. You wanna see my prosthetic?"

"Uh, fuck _yeah_." Dr. DunBroch had given me a case to keep it in, and Jack made me put it on, though I wasn't quite able to get the straps on right. "Dude, you're like the Six Million Dollar Man," he said, and his enthusiasm was genuine. He was happy for me, happy that I was alive, and that I would have a chance to walk again, which was more than I could say about myself.

"I don't think six million dollars would even cover how much it costs to make one of these, nowadays," I said.

"Well, it would at least be enough to make one of the screws. The Six Million Dollar Screwâ€”no, that sounds like a porno."

Jack managed to stay about an hour longer than the hospital usually allowed visitors by telling the attending nurse that he couldn't find his phone every time she came in to tell him it was time to leave. "Jeez, like lay off me," he muttered, "I only get to hang out with my best friend a few hours a day."

"Gosh, you're clingy," I teased, "You should be happy to know that Dr. DunBroch said I could be released within the next few days, by the way."

This new information made him perk up considerably. "I am going to make you so much macaroni and cheese," he promised, giving me an enthusiastic squeeze as the nurse hovered disapprovingly in the hallway, "Mac and cheese has healing properties, which you knew already. You'll be back to your old crotchety self in no time."

"As opposed to my new crotchety self?"

"Exactly. I've been lost without my condescending, know-it-all, pain-in-the-ass bestie, y'know." With that statement, I realized that I wasn't the only one who must have been feeling lonely, and I felt another pang of guilt for my recent selfish behavior. It should have been obvious to me that I wasn't the only one being made to suffer; I was glad now that I hadn't told Jack what I'd been going through. No need to pile my own burdens on top of his own; after all, he had to take care of everything back home while I was stuck here.

"Hey, Jack. Here, take my debit card," I told him as he made to leave.

"Why?"

"Rent is due soon, right?"

"Hiccupâ€”, "

"Dude, just take it. I'll text you my pin."

"I'm not taking your savings, man."

"Shut up," I said, grabbing his hand and forcing my card between his fingers. He had been the one who'd brought me my stuffâ€"I knew now I should have done this before. "You can't just pay for everything on your own. It's our apartment, Frost. Look at me," I insisted as he opened his mouth to argue once again, "I'm useless right now. Take my money, Jack."

"You're not useless, you idiot," he grumbled firmly, slipping my card into his own wallet. "But fine, whatever, if you're gonna be a baby about it."

Strangely enough, I felt much better, even after he'd gone and the loneliness set in again for the night. Today wasn't that bad, I decided. Even the visit to the shrink hadn't been a total waste of time. Dad is coming back tomorrow, I thought. I could ask him about the dragon, but chances were he wouldn't remember one random childhood flight of fancy out of millions.

It couldn't possibly hurt to ask him, though, as long as I left out the part where I thought I'd seen one in that ravine. Can't go around letting people think I'm losing my mind, now can I? I thought as I settled down for a night of non-drug induced sleep.

x

**I'm going cross-eyed writing this, I hope my new glasses are ready soon. (i'm extremely astigmatic) (extremely) **

**Reviews make my eyesight one quintillionth of a percent better.
:D**

6. Chapter 6

In case anyone was wondering, my good mood didn't last. The next morning I woke up with a fierce pain burning in my leg. Or rather, I woke up because of it. Without realizing it, I had become accustomed to the constant throbbing ache that comes with having one of your limbs removed. It was with me always, and I had simply learned to ignore it, or at the very least, bear it with the help of painkillers.

The pain I woke up with was different. It was the pain of each and every muscle and nerve ending in my leg screaming from overuse, and at first I couldn't imagine what I had done to cause it. My first day of physical therapy hadn't elicited this kind of pain, so why had the second?

The answer came to me when they brought Dr. DunBroch in to determine what was wrong. As she was feeling along my leg, I remembered her daughter's similar ministrations, and how loose and relaxed the limb had felt afterward. I'd been able to put more pressure on it, and move about more easily. Whatever she had done had enabled me to walk with less effort, but it had also permitted me to overtax my still healing injury.

"I don't understand," Dr. DunBroch said, puzzled. I couldn't see her because I had my hands over my eyes. The pain was making me grind my teeth, and the motion and pressure in my jaw had spiked up into my head, resulting in yet another headache. "You were doing so well."

Perhaps you're not as far along as we thought. I must have pushed you too far, Hiccup. I'm very sorry, dear."

I almost told her that it wasn't her fault—it was that bossy daughter of hers that had done this to me. But at the last second I just mumbled that it wasn't that big a deal, and could I please have something to take the edge off of the pain. As much as I was furious that Merida had—perhaps unwittingly—done this to me, I knew what it was like to have a contentious relationship with a parent. I didn't want to be the one who made things worse for her.

Speaking of parents, just before noontime I heard a loud clamor in the hallway, accompanied by a loud, brusque, and very distinct voice issuing an apology. A moment later the doorway was filled with the hulking form of my father.

"Hi dad," I said groggily. I must have looked just as bad as I sounded—not to mention felt—because a heavy frown creased his brow.

"Son, you look absolutely knackered," he aptly noted.

"I'm fine," I lied.

"Have ye been walking?"

"Sort of."

"And your leg?"

"It's just swell, dad," I said tetchily.

"Ach, now, what have I said about the sass?" he rumbled, "If you can't give me a straight answer, then don't bother with one at all."

"Well, pardon me for being in a bad mood!" I snapped. I had to bite down on my tongue to keep from going off on a tirade. The extra dose of painkillers were once again making it hard for me to think rationally, but I knew that I didn't want to get into an argument with my dad. It would serve no purpose, aside from letting me blow off the head of steam that had been steadily building up over the past few weeks.

To his credit, my dad looked mildly contrite, which I knew was the best I was going to get out of him. "So, I, ah, spoke with your doctor in the hall," he said, "She told me you might be well enough to come home in a few days."

"Yeah," I confirmed, then I realized what he'd said, "Wait, 'come home?' As in, '_home_?'"

"Well, ye can't go back to that apartment. There's no elevator in that building, and it's not handicap accessible," he explained, as though all of this should have been obvious.

"B-but, dad—," I sputtered, trying to come up with a decent argument, "I—Jack, he needs—I can't just move back in with you!" Being drugged made it hard for me to feel as wildly opposed to this idea as I should have, but I was managing. Under no circumstances did

I want to move back in with my fatherâ€”I had friends who had had to do that very same thing, for one reason or another, and they always seemed miserable. Once you've had a taste of freedom, it's not easy to just go back to the way things were.

"Of course ye can," he argued with a dismissive gesture, "Just for a bit, until you're, ah, recovered."

My jaw worked soundlessly as I realized I didn't have much say in the matter. He was right, after all. The apartment building I had come to call home wouldn't exactly lend itself to easy mobility. It was only four stories tall, so the lack of an elevator had never been a problem before. I hadn't factored that detail into the equationâ€”until I was able to walk somewhat normally, I wouldn't be able to go up and down all of those stairs.

The full reality of my situation struck me like a freight train. There was no panic attack this time, just a heavy sensation of clarity. I was disabled now. There was nothing I could do about it, other than deal with it like the adult I was supposed to be. All of my anger was useless. It evaporated with little fanfare, leaving me feeling resigned, and more than slightly forsaken.

"Okay," I said, my tone flat, albeit not in the usual sarcastic way. My dad, who never seems to pick up on anything, noticed the sudden mood change, and gave me an odd look.

"Well, alright then," he said, nodding and seeming taken aback by the lack of further argument. "I can get things ready for ye at home while you work onâ€”whatever it is the doctors have ye doing."

"Alright."

Though he'd just been gone for two days straight, my father only wound up sticking around for another half-an-hour or so. Somebody called him, said they needed him back at the shop, but he told me to call him if I needed anything.

"Dad, wait," I said as he walked toward the door.

"Yes, son?"

I opened my mouth, hesitated; was it really worth my time to ask him? Somehow finding out if the dragon was real or not didn't seem as important anymore. But he was standing there, expectant, and I figured, what the hell. "When I was littleâ€”did I ever say anything aboutâ€”seeing a dragon?"

Something changed in his demeanor. His eyes went wide, and his body stiffened, his mouth dropping open slightly. "Iâ€”ahâ€”not that I recall. Why do you ask?"

He was lying. More importantly, he was startled, and obviously disconcerted by the question. "No reason," I said with a shrug, "I justâ€”had a weird dream, is all." It wasn't a lie, at least.

"Well thenâ€”I'll see you," he said, and then he was gone, slipping out of the room more quickly than he needed to. Why did he lie? I wondered. Why had the question seemed to rattle him?

Since I was having an off day with my leg, all my appointments were cancelled. I wasn't due to see Sanderson again until the next week, anyway, so that simply meant I wouldn't have to put up with physical therapy, or any of the other tests they seemed to enjoy subjecting me to. With my mind slightly clouded by the latest round of painkillers, I finally managed to pull out my laptop and resume my search.

_If I saw a dragon when I was little, then why don't I remember it? I clicked through a gallery of sketches, trying to fit the image in my head with the images on screen. There were no pictures of dragons—there were bones, and skins, and a few taxidermied specimens, but looking at those gave me the creeps. All species of dragons had gone extinct before the invention of the camera, so drawings were all I had to go by, and many of them seemed vaguely cartoonish and unrealistic. Not that they were bad, or anything, just unlikely.

This is going to take me the rest of my life, I decided after about an hour. There were pages upon pages of different dragons, from every country and continent. I couldn't believe mankind had ever possessed the power to wipe out so many creatures. It was astounding, and upsetting. With an aggravated sigh, I clicked back through to the homepage, reading through the different classifications of dragons once again, when something caught my eye. A bolded line of text near the bottom of the sidebar that read: ****Questions? Contact the Administrator****. It was worth a shot, if nothing else.

When I clicked on the link, the site took me to a page with one of those query boxes, where you filled in your email address and wrote out your question or comment. They're usually impossible to find, especially when you urgently need to contact customer service for anything, so I was glad that for once somebody was making it easy for me.

To the Administrator, I wrote, taking a moment to plan what I was going to say before I said it. _When I was a kid I had a picture of a certain dragon, but I cannot for the life of me remember what it was called. It's been bugging me lately, so I was wondering if you could assist me. The dragon in the picture was rather large and darkly colored, and it had large green eyes and bat wings. I'm sorry I can't be more descriptive, but that's all I can remember. Thank you for your time —HH_

As I was fairly certain that I wouldn't get an answer any time today, I considered powering down and going to sleep. I felt bone weary despite not having done much at all besides accept the cruel fate that had been thrust upon me. Just as I was about to exit my browser, I heard the clicking noise that indicated a new email had been received.

_Hello, HH! Thank you for your question. The dragon you're referring to sounds to me like a __skrill__, or a __toxic nightshade__. Hope that helps! —Fishlegs, Admin_

I already knew it wasn't a skrill, nor was it a nightshade, although it was a good deal closer than I'd come on my own.

Thanks for the quick reply, but neither of those seem to match up. The dragon in my picture was more— I paused, squeezing my eyes shut

and trying to remember_. It was more catlike? I think it had a longer tail, and weird fin things. I'm pretty sure it was totally black, as well. "HH_

Not five minutes later I had another reply.

_Oh! I think I know why you weren't able to find that dragon on my site. It sounds to me like it could be a __night fury__. As far as anyone can tell, night furies never actually existed, or if they did, then they died out long before the other dragon species. They were said to be very reclusive, and it was rare that people actually got a look at one. In all likelihood, the dragons that people were seeing was one of the ones I already mentioned. "Fishlegs, Admin_

The link he'd sent me this time took me to a website that concerned solely mythical creatures. There were more than a few dragon species listed, along with unicorns and the tooth fairy, I noted.

Like on the dragon archives website, though, there was a drawing posted. When I saw the picture, I felt something click. _That's it_, I thought, _that's what I saw_.

Any excitement I might have felt was short-lived, however. If night furies had never even existed in the first place, then it was even less likely that I'd actually seen one. I must have just made it all up then. There could be no other explanation; I'd pulled some memory from the dredges of my mind and fabricated the whole thing. What of my childhood sighting, though? I still didn't have all of the answers there, but asking my dad about it with the way he had reacted, well I might as well ask a brick wall.

Pointless, I thought. With all of these new insights, I shut down my laptop and stowed it away in its case. _You made it all up_, I told myself. There was nothing more to it. Nothing to ferret out, or lose sleep over.

I lay back, but I couldn't sleep. I wound up staring out the window, longing to be outside; be anywhere but here, really. _There's nowhere for me to go. I'm trapped_. Not just by the hospital, but by my whole life. I heard my phone buzz, but I ignored it "I couldn't bear to tell Jack that I wouldn't be coming home anytime soon. Not yet. If I could, I would put off telling him forever.

"Knock, knock." Merida's voice at my door nearly sent my heart bursting out of my chest.

Recovering quickly, I looked over at her with a glare that even I could tell lacked the usual verve. "What?" I asked simply.

"You weren't in therapy today," she said, standing there a tad gawkily before making up her mind and waltzing right in. "Mum said you weren't up to it, so I thought I'd drop by and keep you company."

"Great."

"Ah, so we're back to surly, are we?" she asked with a grin. I made a noise halfway between a sigh and a grunt, and went back to staring out the window. "Oookay then. So how's the old leg?"

"It feels like rainbows and sunshine," I said.

"That bad? What did you do to it now?" she asked, coming to lean on my bed and trace a finger along the sheets.

"_I_ didn't do anything to it," I said, tone accusatory, "You're the one who had to go all healing hands on me and then convince me to prance around on it like I'd been magically healed."

"What? Don't be ridiculous, I've treated all sorts of sprains and pulled muscles on humans _and_ horses. I know what I'm doing."

"Obviously not well enough," I grumbled, "I woke up and it felt like my leg was full of broken glass, so thanks a lot, Dr. Quinn."

She opened her mouth as if to object, but then a thoughtful expression crossed her face, and she put her hands on her hips as she peered down at me. "Oh, bollocks."

"What?"

"Wellâ€¦I'd never worked on a person who was missing half of the limb I was treating. Maybe the nerve endings, or the muscles, orâ€¦," she trailed off, her thoughtful expression becoming one of guilt, "Ach, I'm such a git! I should have asked mum first, orâ€¦I'm sorry, Hiccup. I wasn't thinking."

I was surprised that she apologized so readily. "It's fine," I said softly, avoiding her gaze. It didn't really make much of a difference, anyway. In all probability, I'd be back in therapy again the next day.

"Really? No snarky comments? You must really be in pain," she said, leaning over me with her hands on the edge of the bed. "Come on now, snipe at me, or I'm just going to keep feeling terrible about the whole thing."

"Maybe you deserve to feel terrible."

"Ah, there it is. Whew, you had me worried for a second there," she said, fanning herself with a hand, and wearing a feigned look of relief.

"Glad to have allayed your fears," I said, making her giggle.

"Say," she said, dropping down to her elbows so that we were closer to eye level, "You want to get out of here?"

"Sure, let's go jogging."

"Don't be sarcastic, you twit. I'll bet anything that you haven't been outside in ages. You want to nip out for a bit?"

"Where?"

"There's a pretty nice courtyard out there. And I'm still in my scrubs, so it won't look terribly suspicious. Just follow my lead, and nobody will bother us."

"You hope."

"I know." I wasn't sure why, but I heard my voice saying "yes" and she left the room, returning a moment later with a pilfered wheelchair. "Up and at 'em. There you go. Okay, just act like we're not doing anything wrong, and we won't get caught."

"How do I act like I'm not doing anything wrong?"

"Just be normal," she said as she wheeled me out into the hallway.

"Okay, I'm really not sure how to do that either." I heard her stifled laughter as she pushed me toward the elevator at the far end of the hall, out of sight of the nurses' station.

"Don't you think someone will notice I'm gone?" I asked as the elevator delivered us to the ground floor.

"Maybe, but do you really think they'll be alarmed that the one-legged boy is missing? I mean, where would you go on your own without your prosthetic? They'll think that wherever you've gone is where you're meant to be."

"Good point," I admitted, hoping she was right. I've never liked getting people into trouble on my account. That was always Jack's specialty.

Outside it was hot. I had almost forgotten that it was summer, though July was just starting to close in. How far along would I be by the end of summer? I hoped well enough at least that I could get to and from my classes without help.

"Fuck," I said aloud, gripping the armrests as Merida scooted my chair up alongside a bench.

"What is it?" she asked, sounding concerned as she seated herself.

"Nothing," I sighed. "I just forgot I have to go back to school in the fall."

"I know what you mean."

"No, it's not just that I have to go back to school. I have to go back with this," I said, motioning toward my concealed leg. It was almost hot enough out to make me consider removing the blanket. Almost.

"Ah, I see," she said, "Worried about people giving you funny looks?"

"Not as much as I'm worried about the questions," I said. "I'm sure there'll be plenty of them."

"You could just decline to answer."

"I guess."

"Oh, come on, I brought you out here to cheer you up, not to watch your brooding, charming as it is."

"Sorry," I muttered, "It's justâ€¦not been a really good day for me."

"I'm sorry, pet," she said, giving me the first real sympathetic look I'd ever seen on her face. "You want to talk about it?"

I thought about telling her about having to move back in with my father, and having to abandon my best friend in the process, but decided against it. Instead, I asked her the last thing I probably should have. "Do you know anything about dragons?"

"Dragons?" she said, frowning at the odd question, "I know they're extinct. Why?"

"No reason," I said, "Justâ€¦it's not important."

"Alright. Oh, I've been wanting to ask, what's B.U. like? I've been to the campus a few times, and it's huge."

"Yeah," I agreed, "but it's not as bad as it looks. You'll get used to it pretty fast."

"Do you think maybeâ€¦you could show me around someday?" She looked hopeful, but not too hopeful, as if she was purposely reining herself in.

"Iâ€¦," I could think of a million reasons not to. But something about the way she was looking at me made me say yes anyway. "Sure. Why not?"

"Yes! Ah, well, ahem. Mum will be pleased. She's always saying I need proper friends, and she likes you for some reason, soâ€¦," she trailed off, biting her lip as though embarrassed by her pleased response. She tucked a stray coil of red hair back behind her ear, then pretended to examine her fingernails for a moment, trying to hide a smile.

"Right," I said, more to break the silence than anything else.

"Yeah."

"So, ahâ€¦how'd you get into archery?" I asked, searching for a new topic.

"Oh, well, it was an uphill battle, that. Mum wanted me to take something less potentially fatal, but eventually my dad convinced her. I had to compromise, though, and pick something else 'girly' to take as well, so I picked horseback riding, which isn't exactly safe. But she thought it would be more ladylike, so really, the joke's on her," she snickered.

"My dad would have killed for me to do anything half so girly," I joked, "I've never been good at sports, though. Unless you count ultimate Frisbee, which I do."

"I've never played that. Could you teach me?"

"Ah, wellâ€|maybe," I said, glancing unconsciously down at my leg.

"Don't worry. You'll be back to Frisbee-ing before you know it," Merida said comfortingly.

"Okay, but what I'm really worried about is whether or not I'll ever dance again." She covered her mouth to smother her laughter, avoiding the attention of a pair of orderlies crossing the courtyard.

"Ugh, you're awful. You're the one who's going to get us caught," she hissed, still sniggering.

"I'm not the one cackling like a witch."

"Careful, or I'll turn you into a toad."

We stayed outside for an hour or so, trading insults and trying not to attract attention. "We're probably pushing our luck now," I said after noticing a doctor shooting us a curious look.

Merida sighed, "Oh, alright," and got to her feet. Remarkably, we made it back to my room without being stopped, but I had only just managed to get back into bed when the head nurse traipsed in to check on me.

"One of my nurses said she came in and you weren't here," she said, eyeing Merida suspiciously.

"I was just in the bathroom," I said with a shrug. She didn't look like she believed me, but she let it go with an "oh well" sort of look.

"Told you we'd get away with it," Merida said, winking at me after the nurse had left.

"Yeah, but just barely. Here's hoping she doesn't check the security footage."

"Don't be such a fusspot."

"Look, I'm just saying if we had gotten caught _I_ wouldn't be the one getting in trouble," I said.

"Oh, please. I'd have just told them it was my mum's suggestion."

"And if she didn't corroborate?"

"I'd get a scolding from her. Why are you being so testy about this _now_? It's over."

"Yeah, it's over, but don't you think your mom could get in trouble too if somebody realized you were lying?" She opened her mouth to argue back, but she must have realized the truth behind my words because she snapped it shut a moment later. Admittedly, I hadn't thought of any of this beforehand either, but then again, hindsight is twenty-twenty. I guess I'm just so used to being dragged into Jack's schemes that I don't even put up a fight anymore.

"Well, anyway, I thought we were having fun, but apparently I was wrong," she said, crossing her arms and glowering down at me.

"I wasn't saying thatâ€", "

"Oh, no, Hiccup. Far be it from me to try and cheer you up."

"Why are you mad? I was justâ€|what is happening?"

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," she huffed, "I have to go, anyway. I do actually have work to do, and I will be in trouble if anybody finds out I shirked my duties."

I watched her go, too dumbfounded to say anything other than a weak goodbye. What was she mad about? That I was worried about her getting into trouble? Jack would know, but I remembered I was trying to avoid him. I should have known that ignoring my phone wouldn't really do me much good in that area.

"The fuck, dude?" Jack said later that night, walking into my room with an annoyed expression, still in his work clothes which meant he'd come straight here. "You know every time you don't answer your phone, I'm picturing you dead in a ditch somewhere."

"I'm sorry. Jeez, what are you my dad?" I scoffed as he clambered up onto my bed and hugged me protectively.

"No, I'm your guardian," he said, ruffling my hair, which he knows I hate, "I'm worse than a parent, because you'll never be able to get rid of me." I tolerated him hanging on me for about ten seconds more, before elbowing him in the ribs. "Ow, alright, damn dude!"

"I promise, if I'm ever laying in a ditch somewhere, you'll be the first one I call," I said.

"Good. So, how's shit going here in paradise?" he asked, taking his customary place in the chair beside my bed.

"Terrific. They canceled my therapy today because my leg was all fucked up."

"Shit."

"Yeahâ€|and, wellâ€|you know that girl. The red head?"

"Oh yeah, the cute one?" he said offhandedly.

I tried to ignore the way he said "cute" but I could feel the heat rising in my face nonetheless. "Yeah, sure, her," I said, clearing my throat before regaling him with the story of how she had snuck me outside for a brief taste of freedom.

"Dude," he said, shaking his head slowly once I'd finished.

"What? What did I do?"

"I justâ€|you're the dumbest smart person I've ever met, you know that? You're like Sheldon from Big Bang Theory. You're smart as fuck, but you have no understanding of other human beings."

"Jack."

"It's simple, bro. She risked getting into trouble, not only for sneaking you out, but for neglecting whatever shit it was she was supposed to be doing. Then you start acting like a crybaby, as per your usual modus operandi. I would have hit you if I were her, but you know that from experience."

"Butâ€¦I was justâ€¦I didn't _want_ her to get into trouble. That was my whole point."

"Yeah, and that's why she was pissed, dude."

"_What_?"

"She was mad because she didn't care if she got into trouble, because she just wanted to hang out with you to make you feel better. I've only met her once, so I can't be sure, but it sounds to me like she's digging your whole smart-ass motherfucker routine, y'know. And you had to go and ruin it by being all logical. Honestly, I can't believe I still have to explain shit like this to you, especially after you dated Astrid."

"Astrid wasn't like that," I argued, "she never minced words, she just got right to the point and told me what I was doing wrong."

"Yeah, and what's the fun in that?" Jack snorted, "Look, man. Not everybody is just gonna tell you how they feel, especially somebody who you've known for less than a week. You gotta turn off that brain of yours sometimes."

"What, like you?"

"_Exactly_ like me. See, I don't have these problems because I think with my _heart_."

"Yeah right. You're just a conniving asshole."

"Well, there's that, too, but it works for me." We lapsed into silence while he checked a message on his phone, then he looked up at me and frowned. "What?" he said.

"What's what?"

"You look like someone just drowned a bag of puppies. It's not just 'cause of that girl. See, I can tell because of that whole 'thinking with my heart, thing.'"

Maybe he had a point about that. I hadn't even realized I'd looked upset anymore, just pursing my lips and staring off into space. "It'sâ€¦ah, jeez. My dad came to see me today andâ€¦I can't move back to our building. Not right away," I added quickly after stumbling through the initial explanation.

"What do you mean?"

"My leg, Jack. I can'tâ€¦I couldn't get up to our apartment."

"Fuck, I'll build you a ramp. Or you could build you a ramp," he scoffed.

"Yeah, I'm sure the landlord would be just fine with that," I said, rolling my eyes, "Look, it'd just be temporary. You have my debit card, soâ€¦" He looked away from me, pointedly avoiding my gaze. "You didn't pay the rent yet, did you?"

"I almost have enough money to cover it myself," he said, quickly and defensively.

"And how long are you gonna be able to keep that up?"

"Jesus, Hiccup, I'm not taking your money. I don't care if you put a gun to my head. And besidesâ€¦Punz has sort of been living with me since you've been in here."

"'Sort of?'"

"Alright, she's basically moved in. She said it was just temporary, but if you're not coming backâ€¦", "

"I didn't say I was _never_ coming backâ€¦", "

"I know, I know. Look, it was bound to happen sooner or later," he said, "I meanâ€¦it's Punz, Hiccup. Y'know?"

For a moment I could only stare at him in disbelief. A moment ago I had been ready for another argument, but now I couldn't even feel angry anymore. "I know," I finally relented, "I know, Jack." I was happy for him, but what did this mean for me? Selfishness aside, I knew it would mean I was probably never going to be moving back into that apartment. Jack needed thisâ€¦he needed somebody stable, somebody relatively normal. I had been all he had up until recently, but now he had Rapunzel, and I couldn't get in the way of that.

This is you being logical again, I thought. Logic that forwent everything else, pushed what I was feeling aside in favor of what I knew in my head to be the right decision. Maybe that's what Jack was talking about, but it didn't seem to matter. What did he need me around for; I who couldn't walk, who was imagining things so vividly that I was convinced they were real to the point where I drove myself crazy looking for answers.

"Hiccup?"

"I'm fine, Jack. I'm happy for you, really."

"Good," he said, sighing with relief. "I'm glad that's out there. And look, don't worry about living with your dad, it won't be that bad." I could see him wincing as he said the words, which earned him a dirty look from me. _Not that bad. Yeah, okay, then why don't you move in with him_.

I tried to change the topic, to pretend like I wasn't miserable again. "Hey, Jack, when we were kidsâ€¦do you remember me ever being into dragons?"

"Is that why you were looking them up? Hmmmâ€¦nah, I don't think so."

I remember you were into snakes at one point, which was really creepy shit. Why? You getting nostalgic on me, Haddock?"

"Something like that," I said, offering him a tired smile.

"Well, hey, look if you wanna talk about the good old days, remember that time we shaved the Henderson's poodle?"

"That was you."

"Yeah, but you were the one that ratted me out."

"Because you were a menace to society and I knew you had to be stopped." He laughed at that, and I wondered how much longer it would be before he didn't need me at all anymore.

7. Chapter 7

Double update cuz I fucking love you guys, and because I want to get it so all the chapters are up here and on AO3 so I can stop worrying that I'm uploading the wrong thing to the wrong place
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Four weeks passed, and August came creeping up on the world I'd been shut out of. By mid-July I was released from the hospital, back living at my father's house, and Jack and Rapunzel had officially declared to anyone who would listen that they were living together. Everyone except ourâ€_their_â€_landlord, who had the lease that stated Jack and I would still be living there for another six months until signing time came again. Not that he would even notice that I was missing, because he's an idiot.

Being functionally bed-ridden for nearly three weeks straight has its disadvantages. Jack was the one who drove me homeâ€_dad had to work again, surprise surpriseâ€_and while we were stuck in traffic a song I had never heard came on the radio. "Ugh, fuck I'm so sick of this song, they play it every two seconds," Jack scoffed, quickly changing the channel. I might as well have been gone for a hundred years, what with all the things that seemed to have happened while I was out of the loop.

Aside from Jack and Punz living together, another of our friends from high school had announced she was getting married, which was a shock because Ruffnut Thorston had just never seemed the marrying type. Hell, she had never even been much of the _relationship_ type, either. She and Jack had gotten on _very_ well due to this fact, if you know what I mean. "Dude, I hope she doesn't fucking invite me," he said when he informed me of her upcoming nuptials, "I mean she was cool, but she's also fucking nuts."

There was also news that somebody I knew had had a kid, someone else was going to jail for stealing the barrettes off of cop car, a house not far from mine had burned down, and apparently they were going to tear down my old high school in favor of building a newer, modern one. "It's about time," Jack mumbled, "You remember when the east wing had that leak in the ceiling and they had to shut it down because of all the mold?" I wasn't sure how I felt about any of this.

I wasn't sure if I cared.

Apparently, though, my loss of limb was also a huge topic of discussion amongst our old circle of friends. Nobody had ever mentioned it to me, but someone had set up a Facebook page where people could wish me well, rather than just posting on my own wall. It was just as well—I never check Facebook, anyway, and I couldn't be bothered to stop by and thank everybody for their concern. When I really thought about it, my leg was none of their goddamn business. So what were they all so fucking sorry about?

More often than not, my father's house was quiet. My old bedroom was on the second floor, but I had yet to remaster staircases, and I wound up being moved into the downstairs guest room. As it so happened, that was just fine by me. I redecorated, hanging up thick drapes that blocked out all pretense of sunlight, and the darkness was a nice change from the constant assault of the whiteness that had surrounded me at the hospital. I tried to scour every nuance of that place out of my life that I possibly could. I threw away my hospital bracelet, and scrubbed myself in the shower until my skin was raw so as to wash away the antiseptic stench.

Showering, by the way, is extremely awkward when you've only got one leg. I had to use a shower stool, like I was some fucking geriatric patient in a nursing home. I was surprised they didn't hire out a friggin nurse to come to my house and give me sponge baths.

My physical therapy sessions were cut down to three times a week, with instructions from Dr. DunBroch to start exercising some on my own by going for walks, and doing the stretches she taught me. I told her I would, but in reality, most of my days were spent in bed, ensconced in the dark nest I had constructed. My dad would work all day, and come home to find me either asleep, drugged out on the painkillers I'd been sent home with, or watching some random movie or television series on the TV in my room. Netflix became my new best friend. By escaping into its myriad forms of entertainment, I was no longer required to think about or focus on the real world.

Plus, I finally got to catch up on Doctor Who.

The worst days were Wednesdays, which was when I had to go see Dr. Sanderson. Things had not gotten any better on that front. Despite my feeling of defeated acceptance, I kept up this façade with him, arguing and making snarky comments that had no real feeling behind them. I think he heard the emptiness in my words, because he became less abrasive and confrontational about my attitude, and more understanding, which only made me hate him all the more. I knew I was being petulant, behaving like a child, but I didn't care. I had lost my leg—I could act however I damn well pleased.

Those first four weeks back home were probably the worst, though. Somehow my relationship with my father had deteriorated during my year away, if that was even possible. When I only had to see him a few times a month, it had actually improved things between us. We would have something to talk about as I filled him in on my classes, and he told me how things were going at the shop. To think I had found these interactions grating—how I wished now that I could go back to the way things were.

Now that I was home again, things were worse than they'd been the

first seventeen years I'd lived with the man. For some reason, he seemed to think that now was the time to make an effort. He would drone on and on about work, or current events, or so-and-so who he'd bumped into at the Home Depot. I could see in his eyes that my disinterest did not go unnoticed, but he still kept trying, and I wished he wouldn't. I wished he'd just let me sleep. He was persistent, though, I'll give him that. At least he was making the attempt, which was more than I could say for myself. I had stopped trying to impress him years ago, and I wasn't about to start up again now.

Dr. DunBroch was on the short list of people who I could tolerate—at least on most days. When my leg didn't start acting up, we got along just fine. I was finally starting to make progress, walking more steadily and not needing the crutches so much, when out of the blue she decided that I needed to start "building muscle mass" in my legs—what the fuck was I doing before that exactly?—and had me start working on the leg press and curling machines. It was a whole new world of pain. If I had thought simply tottering around on my prosthetic was hard, then this was like running the New York Marathon without ever having run anywhere else a day in your life.

At least with my physical therapist everything remained professional. I never felt like she was trying to get inside my head and figure me out. Sure, she was empathetic, but more than anything I could tell that she just wanted me to get better. She didn't coddle me, or feel bad for me, or take any of my shit; I had to bandage my own leg, figure out how to strap on the prosthetic, do my stretches without being told, and above all, show up on time. I never dared skip one of her sessions, no matter how lazy or downcast I was feeling. Pleasant as she can be, there just something intimidating about that woman, something that told me I would do well not to get on her bad side.

My real prosthetic, the one I'd been sized for came in finally, but I wore it less than ten minutes before she made me take it off, saying it needed to be sent back for adjustments. It felt just fine to me, better than the temporary one, but I guess she was the expert.

I surprised myself one day by asking her when she thought I could go back to work. I hadn't even thought about my job in weeks, though my boss had called to graciously inform me that there was still a place there for me once I was better. Maybe he planted a seed somewhere in the back of my mind, but for whatever reason I wanted to know. "Soon," she said, pleased that I seemed to want to, "Perhaps if you would do as I told you and start walking more regularly, it could be sooner than you think." I winced. So the fact that I had disobeyed the doctor's orders was more obvious than I'd thought it would be. Great.

I went home that day, took a painkiller to ease the renewed ache in my leg, and called Jack. "You working?" I asked him.

"Nah, I'm watching Regular Show. I think you should change your name to Trash Boat, by the way."

"Yeah, sure, I'll get right on that." For some reason, I felt silly calling him to ask if he wanted to go for a walk of all things, but I hadn't seen him in days it seemed. He was busy working, and I was

busy being a lump of lethargy that detested sunlight. "I'm supposed to walk for my recovery and junk," I said as casually as possible.

"Aw, you lonely? Poor baby. Hang on, I'll be over in a bit."

Forty five minutes later he was knocking on my door. He was wearing sandals, and jeans that he'd rolled up to mid-calf, not to mention a bright blue wife-beater and sunglasses. "Hipster much?" I mocked him.

"It's hot as ass out, okay? You're lucky I didn't melt on my way over here." As for me, I wore jeans as well, but they were rolled all the way down to the tops of my sneakers. It was weird tying a shoe onto my fake foot, but I guess not as weird as the rest of my life had become. My shirt was a regular striped polo, and I don't think I even owned a pair of sunglasses, though that day I wished I did.

The sun glared down on us, though the air wasn't as oppressive as I had imagined it would be. Jack complains about anything above fifty degrees, though, so it's not really practical to gauge the temperature based on his judgment.

"You know, you can't even tell," he said as we strolled down the sidewalk.

"Tell what?" I asked, though I knew what he was talking about.

"Your leg. I mean, you're kind of stiff, but nobody would even know."

"Thanks," I said dryly.

"How's therapy going?"

"Fine," I sighed.

"You getting along alright with your dad?"

"Yeah."

He fell silent, and I could feel him staring at me. When I looked over he was giving me this strange, appraising look, brow furrowed, mouth twisted thoughtfully.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head, "You just seemâ€¦annoyed."

I scoffed. "I was born annoyed."

"No, I meanâ€¦I dunno, it's different. Not like you. It'sâ€¦bitter, rather than charming." Only Jack would ever be so honest with me.

"When in my life have I ever been charming?" I asked, rather than address the issue he was getting at.

"Always," he shrugged, "You're just also socially incompetent, so you never noticed." As long as I've known him, Jack has been trying to

get me to believe these observations he makes about me; that I'm charming, that I'm good-looking, that girls think I'm hot, that my nerdiness is appealing rather than off-putting. Conversely, he's never afraid to tell me when I'm being a condescending asshole, or a know-it-all, or overly bitchy, or even when I'm being pathetic. Not surprisingly, I have an easier time accepting the latter notations about my personality.

We walked in silence until we reached the local park. At this time of day, even though it was summer, there was little activity. Children were at home eating dinner, and there were only a few dog walkers about. "I haven't been here in five-ever," Jack said as we walked through the arching gate. "Remember when we used to come here at night?"

"Vaguely," I answered, biting my lip. I don't know about him, but those weren't exactly fond memories for me. Walking in the dark, talking about our lives like we had some modicum of control over them, those recollections weren't so bad. Coming here in the middle of the night because he wouldn't stop texting me, only to find him drunk on the swing set, or being ditched in favor of some girl who he wouldn't remember the next day so they could go make out in the woodsâ€”sure, maybe that had been fun for him, but it had been stressful for me.

Even when back then when I was supposed to have been young and stupid I had been saddled with the weighty, hyper-responsibility of keeping all of my friends out of trouble. I was the one at the party telling someone they had had too much to drink, I was the one who would sneak out at two in the morning to go pick up a stranded friend, I was the one making people study and covering for them when they skipped class. Everyone had always been telling me what a great friend/student/ boyfriend/ influence/ etc., I was, when I had always felt like I was one small slip-up away from ruining somebody's life.

It was a wonder I hadn't suffered a mental breakdown, what with managing to keep up my own grades and studying for the SATs and trying to get into college, all while balancing my clusterfuck of a social life. People thought I had it easy because I never drank too much, or did drugs, or screwed around with girls the way that Jack did, but pretending that I had everything under control was something that had kept me awake at night.

My one near-miss, the great mistake of my high school career had come the day Astrid had pulled me into a corner between classes and told me she was lateâ€”as in lateâ€”with this wild look of terror in her eyes. I had drifted through the rest of the day like a zombie, then I'd gone home with Jack and suffered what I can only assume was a severe panic-attack. He had been equally horrified, and had paced back and forth across his bedroom swearing like a sailor. Everything, my tenuous balance, my control felt like it had shattered into a million pieces, and it wasn't until the next day after waiting the required ten minutes in numb horror only to see the blue minus sign on the pregnancy test that I even felt like I could breathe again.

Between friends, it was easy to laugh about now, but at the time I had thought my life was over. I had felt like I'd narrowly avoided complete and utter disaster, never knowing that something far worse was waiting for me down the road. All of the good deeds I'd done,

just because it was right to do them, because I cared about my friends and wanted them to be safe—what good was all of that when this was how the universe repaid me?

Bitter I might be, but if I was then at least I had a good reason. Life had screwed me over royally, when all I had ever done was try to help people. What a fucking joke.

With these unpleasant thoughts in mind, Jack and I strolled along the park's paved paths until my leg began to protest. We took a break then, sitting on the raised slab of concrete that served as the plinth for a statue of the park's namesake—Thaddeus Burgess Memorial Park, or BP as Jack calls it. Over the years poor Thaddeus' statue has been vandalized a number of times, and I may or may not know the names a few of the aforementioned vandals. At the moment he was sporting a sprayed on moustache, but believe me that's not the worst he's suffered.

"'Sup, Thad," Jack said to him, "Ah, I missed hanging out around here."

"You mean you miss terrorizing the neighborhood?"

"What else would I mean? Come on, riding bikes, stealing apples from the Yang's backyard, throwing mud at the kids who 'weren't supposed to get their clothes dirty.' Y'know, the good old days."

"Yeah, nothing but fond memories," I grumbled, head still swimming with resentment toward my younger self.

"Gosh you're bitchy today," Jack huffed, "Did you take extra bitch-pills this morning or something?"

"I think I have a good reason to be bitchy," I said, both daunted and miffed by his rebuke.

"Yeah, but you're choosing to be bitchy," he clarified, "You can choose to be bitchy, or you can choose to get the fuck over it and stop acting like a damn baby." He was really angry with me, I realized as I whipped my head around to look at him. What had brought this on?

"Oh, I'm acting like a baby?" I shot back, adding acerbically, "Well sorry my leg got chopped off and made me a pain to be around."

"It's not the leg, dude, it's your shitty attitude," he sniped. "You think I can't notice when you're upset, or something? When you first were in the hospital, you were depressed, yeah, fine, five stages of grief or whatever. But lately, you're just—ugh," he waved his hand in frustration, as if he couldn't even think up a word bad enough to sum up my behavior.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I've always been like this."

"No," he snapped, pointing and gesturing at me with vehemence, "You've always been this sarcastic little asshole, and that's one thing, but this—this is not you. Like I said it's bitter, and it's mean, and it's not Hiccup. I don't know, maybe you can't hear it, but all your little snappy remarks have just been nasty instead of funny. I was just letting them roll off me, going with the

flow, like maybe if I just kept acting like things were normal then you'd chill the fuck out, but I was wrong."

To put it lightly, I was staggered. All of this was news to me; I hadn't realizedâ€¦I had thought it was just like always, but now when I looked back my words did feel a little harsher. When I thought hard enough, I could see the little downward turns of mouths, the tiny tells on people's faces that should have told me I wasn't being funny. I was being a dick. It was only because Jack was such a good friend that he hadn't said anything before; in his mind he'd probably been trying to protect me from further hurt, but I guess now he had reached his limit.

Maybe that was the real reason why Merida had gotten so mad at me.

I shook my head, trying to shake her loose from my thoughts. It wasn't as though I had seen her since that day she'd snuck me out. Nor had I thought of her at all. Well, not much. At least not when her mother didn't bring her up.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, staring intently at an ant scurrying along between my shoes. Being angry was one thing, but treating my friends like shit because of that wasâ€¦well, it _wasn't_ like me. I never took things out on other people, no matter how badly I was feeling, and maybe that was part of my problem. I wouldn't share the burden, and now I was lashing out.

"Please," he grunted, dismissive in his forgiveness, "Justâ€¦stop it, okay?"

"I'll try." When I said it I meant it. I meant it with every part of me.

By the time I got home, the painkiller I'd taken no longer seemed to be having any effect, so I took another. My dad got home shortly after, and when he walked into the house it was to find me sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the glass of milk I'd poured myself as though it were the most fascinating thing I'd ever seen.

"You alright, son?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow at me as he took off his hat and hung it on the back of the door.

"Grrreat," I slurred, slouching in my seat. "Ch-_chipper_."

He spotted my bottle of pills on the counter, and shook his head, walking over and picking the plastic container up with a withering look. "How many of these have you taken in the last six hours?" he asked after having a cursory look at the label.

"Two," I answered, holding up two fingers, just in case he misunderstood me. I couldn't tear my gaze away from the glass of milk.

"And how many are ye supposed to take every six hours?"

"â€¦Not two."

"One," he corrected sternly. "I don't want ye taking these things anymore, Hiccup."

"But I need them," I whined, looking up at him with frantic eyes. My leg was throbbing now, the pain dull and far away. In short shrift, I wouldn't be able to feel even that.

"That's what drug addicts say," he countered bluntly.

"I'm not a drug addict," I drawled, rolling my eyes. Sure, I had been high off my ass more times in the past two months than I'd been in the rest of my short lifetime, but that didn't mean I was addicted to painkillers. Right? I couldn't be sure. I was having a hard time thinking straight, and I wished I was back in the hospital. This whole conversation could have been easily remedied by having a nurse turn up my morphine drip.

My father sighed raggedly, giving me an exasperated look. "I'm flushing these down the toilet."

"Yeah, okay," I snorted, "You do that." I didn't think he actually would, but I should have known better. One flushing later, and I was curled up in bed, inconsolable and as furious as somebody who can't see straight anymore because they're high as a kite can be. I can just get a refill, I thought, I'll just have to hide it from him next time.

When I woke up the next morning with my leg pulsing like it had its own heartbeat, it took me a moment to remember what happened. Then I also remembered that it was Sunday, and I didn't have any appointments that day, so essentially I was screwed unless I wanted to call a cab to take me to get my prescription filled, which I didn't. I still wasn't supposed to drive, mainly because of the painkillers, but also because I was afraid to do so even though my left leg had no part to play in the driver's seat.

Thinking about my car only made me feel worse. My one path to true freedom, and it was stuck, parked in the driveway of my dad's house where it was of no use to anybody. Poor baby, I thought through a haze of drowsy pain. Maybe it sounds atypical to somebody who knows what a non-macho nerd I am, but I have a serious emotional connection to that car, and I should, too. I was the one who had found the ancient Chevy abandoned in the back lot of my father's shop, and begged him to let me have it. "If ye can fix her, she's yours," he'd said with a laugh, probably figuring I'd get sick of the testosterone fumes soon enough, and leave the real mechanics to their work.

It had taken me the entire summer between my junior and senior year in high school, but I had done it, working late into the night, scrounging for parts in the junk heap, sometimes rebuilding pieces nearly from scratch and based solely on drawings I found on the internet. I had rebuilt the tired old Chevy nearly from the ground up, much to everyone's utter disbelief, and I'd done a better job than half the guys who work for my dad. It was really no different a project than the other things I'd built over the years—I had made a robot the summer before, just because, not to mention the rockets that I built for Jack and I to launch into the sky. So I don't really know why everybody was so surprised.

Rebuilding a car of all things was just less nerdy, I guess, though I'd been at the height of geeky joy. It was so much better than just having my dad go buy me some crappy Benz or Charger or whatever, like the snobby rich kids at my school were wont to do. The only thing

better than that was seeing their faces when they saw it was _me_ driving up in a classic car that roared like a dragon and looked like it had just been driven off the lot.

Stop thinking about dragons, I thought reproachfully. It was bad enough that that Fishlegs guy had thought my interest in his website now meant we were dragon-buddies, bad enough that he actually lived nearby and wanted to meet up with me and talk about "what else?" dragons. I had a feeling that I was maybe the first person to show an interest. I'd also made the mistake of chatting with him online a few times, and now he wouldn't leave me alone. Like I needed another headache.

Sighing, I threw off my blankets and walked "staggered" across the hall to the downstairs bathroom, hunting for something to battle the pain. What little the medicine cabinet had to offer, I brought back to my room, sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing Icy Hot onto my leg after swallowing a pair of Aleve. After the hardcore hospital prescribed drugs I'd been taking lately, I knew they would likely have no effect whatsoever, but it was better than nothing.

It took a good half an hour, but I made it to the kitchen, cursing my father with every pained breath. Aches new and old, aches I had forgotten about came back with a vengeance. My ribs were mostly healed, but still twanging, as were my fingers, not to mention my head "oh, fuck my _head_". It pounded, thumping and making my eyes water as I reperced the leftover coffee and slumped down at the kitchen table. Maybe my dad was right about the pills, but fuck, there was a reason people didn't just go cold turkey. The pulsating in my skull made my teeth ache, my jaw and my neck, and I buried my face in my hands as I waited for the coffee to finish brewing.

Toughen up. That's what my dad would have said if he were there. It was his favorite phrase, the age-old mantra that I'd heard all too often growing up. _Toughen up, Hiccup. No tears, boy, walk it off_. My dad didn't believe in medication, didn't usually hold well with doctors and hospitals. Whenever he injured himself at work he would tape it up himself, and decline medical attention. Hell, he hadn't even let me get braces as a kid, scoffing that it was a waste of time and money, which had of course led to a lifetime of self-consciousness for me and my mouthful of crooked teeth. But of course his response had been for me to _toughen up_.

Alright then, I thought, sipping coffee and wincing as the heat made my teeth ache. _Toughen up, okay_. I had to do something, anything, to distract myself. To take my mind off of how much everything just _hurt_.

I stepped out the back door, onto the porch, daunted by the back stairs enough to convince myself that I needed a moment to sit and think. There were only three steps, but they were enough to give me pause. The most I could do was seat myself on the topmost step, shuddering as my leg began to tingle with relief from the lack of weight.

What could I do? I could draw, but I didn't feel particularly artistic at the moment. I could build something, work on my car. There was always something to tinker with under the hood, or at least I could pretend that I was tinkering.

A sound reached my ears, a soft rumble, almost imperceptible, and then something moved in my peripheral vision, making me jump. "Oh, shit, kitty, you scared me." I shook my head as the grey and white tuxedo cat ghosted up the steps, purring and swishing its tail, eyes half-lidded. I hadn't seen this one in a while, but I knew it to be one of the neighbor's cats. "Is there anything in particular I can help you with?" I asked.

"Mrow?" he voiced, butting his head against my arm.

"Right, sorry," I said, raising an obliging hand and rubbing his ears. "God damn, my life is total shit, you know that, cat?"

"Mrrrr."

"Easy for you to say. You're a cat."

"Mrrret."

"Tell you what. Let's switch places, you and me. You can deal with all of this shit, all the crap piled on top of crap, and I can sleep sixteen hours a day and only wake up to eat and get belly rubs." As if on cue, the cat flopped over, showing me his fluffy white stomach, and damn it if I'm not a sucker for chubby animal bellies. "You suck, cat. I don't even like you," I grumbled, though he didn't seem to care what I thought as long as I kept scratching his tummy.

After a few minutes of that I finally got back to my feet, wincing and hissing, and gripping the bannister to keep from falling down the stairs and landing flat on my face. "Thanks for the distraction," I said to the cat. He followed me as far as the edge of my backyard, where the tree line started. I don't know what on Earth possessed me, but for some reason now I wanted to go for a walk, to surround myself with trees and put as much space between myself and humanity as I possibly could. My car could wait—I would have plenty of time to screw around with the engine later on.

The first tree I reached I had to stop and lean against. Jesus, how was this so much friggin harder? Had I really been that dependent on the damn painkillers? Maybe my dad had been right after all, but shit, he could have at least let me wean myself off of them. This was torture, but now it was at least partially self-inflicted. After all, I didn't have to go traipsing through the woods, but dammit I was gonna do it anyway. Why? Because I'm insane, apparently.

Or maybe I was trying to prove something to myself. Jack was right, after all. I was becoming bitter, and it scared me, almost more than being disabled did. If I kept on going, I would drive off everyone I cared about, and then I'd be alone. Again.

Somehow all that equated to me walking in the woods, limping more than usual, fairly dragging my prosthetic along with me. Maybe this was a bad idea, I thought as I stopped to catch my breath. I was winded already and I wasn't even fifty yards in. But I kept going, kept shambling along, and eventually the persistent burn seemed to fade. It didn't dissolve completely, but it became tolerable enough for me to move with a little more ease. Maybe it was those endorphins or whatever that Jack is always talking about. A natural high.

It sounded just as dumb in my head as it did whenever he talked about running, but in practice it seemed to be working. After a time, I slowly started to feel less and less like death on legs.

Walking was tiring, though. Without the mask of painkillers, I became aware of my weariness far more quickly, and soon began to succumb to it. I was out of breath, and fairly deep into the woods at that point. A fallen log offered me a chance to rest before I headed back home. _Just a few minutes_, I thought, but the walk back felt even more intimidating than the stairs had earlier. It wasn't like I could just set up camp here and live in the woods forever, though.

Just as I finally got my breathing under control, and felt as though I could push on, I heard something that sounded almost akin to distant thunder. I got to my feet, frowning through the overgrowth and feeling a tug of fear—"thunder didn't make the ground vibrate. Did it? Whatever it was, it was getting louder, and I had a sudden flashback, a moment where I was no longer standing in the woods, but laying on my back in the ravine, _sun bearing down as something rumbled, something pressed its nose against my face, dry and scaly—"

Reeling, I stepped back, falling against a tree as something enormous barreled down the path toward me. _Oh God, not again_, I thought, vision distorted between one reality and the next as it suddenly slowed, and then came to a stop. "Hiccup?" Was it just my imagination, or had the enormous dark beast before me just said my name? "What are you doing out here?" No, it said my name, though for some reason it sounded suspiciously like—"

"Merida?"

"That's me," she said, and all at once my focus was restored, and I saw that the creature in front of me was not a dragon, but a horse. An enormous, black and white, snuffing, horse. "Are you alright?" she asked, and I watched her swing down from the saddle. She was wearing some sort of strange, horse-riding outfit; britches and riding boots, a fleece coat that seemed too heavy for summer, and a little helmet over her hair, still wild even when pulled back in a ponytail. If she was still angry with me, she didn't show it as she marched up to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

I realized I was breathing hard, my heart pounding in my chest. "I'm fine," I said, sucking in big gulps of air, "Just—" war flashbacks."

"Well, yes, that does make it sound as though you're fine," she scoffed. "What are you doing way out in the woods?" she asked again.

"I was—" walking. My house isn't far from here," I said, jerking a thumb back over my shoulder. "What are _you_ doing out here?" I eyed the horse, who was eying me in turn with large, dark eyes.

"I was just taking Angus out for a run. He's stabled at the school." That's right, I thought, the agricultural school. That part of campus wasn't too far away from my dad's house, but I rarely ventured that far into the woods.

"Are youâ€¦are you allowed to just ride him around like this?" By then I should have known that she would do whatever she wanted whether it was "allowed" or not.

"What does it matter? He needed a real run, not a trot around the corral. Are you sure you're alright? You look dreadful," she said, hands on her hips again, giving me a critical once over with her eyes.

"Thanks," I huffed, "I'm fine. I justâ€¦I'm tired."

"Where do you live?" she asked, "I could give you a ride back to your house."

"Uh, no thanks," I said, maybe too quickly.

"Don't worry, lamb, Angus won't let you fall. Probably," she said with that cheeky grin of hers.

"Yeah, sure. All the same, I think I'll just walk." It was weird running into her like thisâ€¦it would have been weird running into anyone riding around on a horse in the small stretch of woods behind my old neighborhood. The fact that it was Merida just made it weirder. It almost didn't feel like a coincidence.

"You don't have to be afraid of him," she said coyly. If she was trying to appeal to some manly part of me that despised having people think I was afraid, she had another thing coming.

"I'm not afraid," I told her simply, "I just think being jostled around on the back of a horse wouldn't exactly help my situation."

"Right." I looked at her, then over at the horse, who was standing calmly in the middle of the trail, chewing at the bit in his mouth. Without so much as batting an eyelash, I stepped over to him, offering my hand for him to sniff. His breath whuffed over my palm, his lips feeling for a treat I didn't have.

"You're right," I told her, running my hand up his velvety nose, "I'm shaking in my boots." The horse butted his nose against me as I found a spot below his jaw to scratch, and Merida stood there, watching with an unreadable expression that made me far more uncomfortable than it should have. I coughed into my palm, discreetly hiding the way my face seemed to flush as I turned and headed back down the trail toward home.

I shouldn't have been surprised that she followed me. When I told her I didn't need an escort, she told me that I should go look at myself in the mirror when we reached my house. "You're white as a sheet, and you look like you're about to keel over," she informed me. In the end I was glad she had tagged along, otherwise I would have had to crawl up the deck stairs. By the time we made it back, I felt so exhausted it was making me nauseous, and the fire was back, burning in both of my legs now. Dr. DunBroch had told me my right leg would wind up overcompensating for the weakness in my left which would lead to pain in both limbs, and boy was she right.

"There we go," Merida said, now half-carrying me as we walked into my kitchen. Once more I found myself falling into the kitchen chair, and

then I watched as she pulled a glass out of the dish drainer and filled it with water from the sink. Being a spoiled American, I was usually loathe to drink tap-water, but I was too tired and thirsty to put up a fight.

"Thanks," I mumbled, watching her as she took a seat. Was it weird that she was in my house now? Certainly not as weird as the fact that her horse was hobbled on the deck railings in my backyard. _Everything is weird, just quit worrying about it_, I told myself.

"I haven't seen much of you," she said, watching me sip my water.

I shrugged in response. "I've been here," I said.

"So I gathered. How are things going with mum?"

"Not bad."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." I bit my lip, took another sip of water, then loosed a ragged sigh. "Look," I said, "I justâ€¦I want to apologize forâ€¦ugh, for being an asshole."

"What do you mean?" she asked, taken aback.

"You knowâ€¦when you got mad at me?" She continued to stare blankly at me, and I sighed again, "When you snuck me out? I got mad because you could have gotten into trouble, and you got mad because I was being insufferable?"

"Oh, that," she said, waving a hand dismissively, "Don't worry about it. I'mâ€¦it's fine. I was a bit peeved, granted, but I'm over it."

"So why have you been avoiding me?" I asked, bewildered.

"Avoiding you?" she laughed, "I have other things to worry about than running into you."

"Well, gee, thanks."

"Oh, I don't mean it like that. I've been working, at a real job. I got one down at the stables." Well, that explained it then. The reason I hadn't seen her recently, at least.

"Your mom didn't say anything," I told her.

"Ah, well that's because she's not happy about it. Me being able to go off and do something out from under her thumb, that is." I considered telling her that the way she pursed her lips, looking put out by this statement was almost a mirror image of the way her mother looked whenever she was annoyed, but I wisely decided against it. Unlike her mother, though, her expression made my stomach do a funny flip-flop. I took another sip of water, and stared down at the surface of the table.

Just as I was about to say something to her, perhaps about asking if she wanted to stay for a while, I heard the front door open, and we

both jumped in our seats. "Hiccup," my dad's voice called through the house, the sound of his heavy tread echoing down the hallway. It was close to noon, so I reasoned that he must be home for lunch. "Son, why is there a horse inâ€"oh, hello." He appeared in the doorway, confused expression becoming one of incomprehension.

"Hi," Merida chirped, jumping up from her seat and offering him her hand, "You're Hiccup's father, right?"

"Ah, yes, yes I am. And who might this be?" he asked, directing the question at me.

"Merida," she answered, calling his attention back to her. "And the horse is mine. Speaking of which, I really should be getting back. My lunch break was over twenty minutes ago. It was nice meeting you, though. Bye, Hiccup."

"Bye," I said, raising a weary hand to wave farewell as she slipped out the back door.

"Well," my dad said, watching her through the window. He had that look on his face that he got when he didn't quite know what to make of a situation. I had seen it often enough whenever my friends came around.

"I'm gonna go lie down," I said before he could make up his mind. A brief lookâ€"of what, disappointment?â€"flashed across his features, but I was already heaving myself up from my chair, my stiffening muscles protesting as I headed toward the hallway.

It seemed I made it to my bed just in time, because as soon as my head hit the pillow I was out like a light. Later, when I woke, I felt like I'd gotten the shit beat out of meâ€"if everything had hurt before, it paled in comparison to the way it hurt now. _That's how you know it's working, _Dr. DunBroch had told me. _You gotta roll with it_, Jack had once crowed after a race, _feel the burn, baby!_ Oh, I was feeling the burn, alright.

My phone buzzed from somewhere, and I was almost too tired to bother looking, but I found it on the floor next to my bed. I had an email, from Fishlegs of course. _Oh, great, what now?_ I thought.

Hiccup, the message read, _I found something about night furies you might want to hear. There's some solid evidence of one having been captured around here once. I really think we should meet up to talk about it! What do you think?_

Captured? My heart leapt into my throat, and I had a moment of panic before I realized that if a dragon had been captured any time recently, I would have heard about it. Whatever he was talking about, it must have happened a long time ago.

It wouldn't hurt to give the poor guy a break, I thought. He was obviously desperate to have somebody to talk about dragons to, if he was being this persistent.

Sure, I told him, _when and where?_

"_Bitches ain't shit, and they ain't sayin' nothin.' A hundred mothafuckas can't tell me nothin.' I beez in the trap, bee beez in the trap, I beez in the trap, bee beez in the trap."_

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to soothe you with the gentle melodies of Nicki Minaj. Is it working?"

"A little."

"Good."

Aside from Jack's rap exposition, the coffee shop I found myself in two days later was mostly quiet. Jason Mraz wafted softly over the speakers, oddly enough; places like this usually don't play music that "mainstream" people would actually recognize. We sat in a booth in the corner, Jack crouching on his chair rather than sitting upright like a normal person, me shifting uncomfortably on the hard wooden bench built into the wall. Only a few additional patrons occupied the caf  's other tables, and most of them were on their laptops, typing away, or reading.

"So, who is this dude that you're meeting again?" Jack asked distractedly, focus divided between me and his game of Candy Crush.

"Just an internet friend," I said, trying my best to sound casual about it.

"Uh-huh," he grunted, "And you guys talk about  dragons?"

"_Yes_," I answered, perhaps with a tad more force than necessary.

Jack quirked an eyebrow at me, and scoffed.
"Alright."

"What?"

"Nothing," he said, shrugging, "I just never knew you _that_ into dragons, dude."

"I'm not _that_ into dragons. Look, he just  I feel kinda bad for the guy. He's got something he wants to show me, so  " I trailed off, gesturing helplessly.

"Hey, no worries," Jack said, "You were wise to bring me along with you, though." Jack considers himself something of an aficionado when it comes to dealing with anything internet-related. Rapunzel and I are two of only very few people who know what a huge online following his blog has. People dig his photography, but it's his personality that really draws in the big crowds. He's just the right amount of weird, I guess, whereas my internet interactions have always been sort of  static.

Most of the people I know online are casual acquaintances at best. Meanwhile, Jack has people in Tibet who he's better friends with than some of the people he knows in real life.

Still, part of me felt like bringing him along was a bad idea. In order to do so, I had at least had to tell him part of the reason why, of course. He would never just take my newfound interest in dragons at face value, because he's a nosy little bastard. Besides, I had needed a ride down to the coffee shop where Fishlegs had agreed to meet me, and there was no way I was asking my dad for a lift. Explaining things to Jack had been awkward enough. At least I had managed to do so without letting slip that I had seen a dragon in that ravine, though.

As far as accepting whether or not I'd really seen that dragon—well, I was still on the fence. Mostly. Well, I was leaning over the fence, really. Okay, I was on the side of the fence where I was pretty sure it had really happened. The fence was on fire, and I couldn't make up my damn mind. This fence analogy has gone too far.

"Yo," Jack said, nudging me out of my musing with an elbow, "That him?" He nodded toward the door, where a guy the size of four or five linebackers stood looking around nervously, having just walked through the door. I had told him I would be bringing a friend, but he looked mildly apprehensive when he spotted us sitting in the corner. When it didn't look like he planned on moving any time soon, Jack—"ever helpful"—waved him over with a, "Over here, homeslice."

"_Jack_," I murmured sternly.

"What?"

"Just—don't, okay."

"Don't what?" he asked innocently. Maybe I was the one who'd been acting like a total shit lately, but Jack has a tendency to just—be bizarre at the worst possible moments. Not everyone understands his sense of humor, and some people tend to take offense when they thought he was making fun of them.

I gave him a withering glare, and then the time for warnings was over, because Fishlegs had made his way across the café and was standing before us, a dusty-looking old book clutched in his hulking hands. For a moment he just stood there, opening and shutting his mouth like he didn't know what to say. Jack and I exchanged glances, and finally I cut the poor guy some slack and got to my feet, wincing ever-so-slightly as my leg twinged, and hoping it went unnoticed. "Nice to meet you in, ah, person, Fishlegs," I said, ignoring the noise Jack made in an effort to cover up how much my awkwardness amused him.

"Oh, right," he said, eyes going wide as if my words had snapped him out of some sort of trance, "Same here. Oh, man, I've been looking forward to this, really, like I was really hoping you'd agree to meet up with me. I mean, there's not that many people who care about dragons, but I think they're just really fascinating, and I'm glad I finally found another enthusiast."

"Yeah," I said, slightly dazed by the onrush of words, "Um, me too."

"Yeah, dragons are totally rad," Jack said with an over-eager grin, and I may or may not have purposely elbowed him in the head as I sat back down.

"They're the raddest," Fishlegs agreed, taking a seat opposite Jack and I, "You know I've been running that site since I was in the tenth grade, and all I've ever gotten are questions from kids writing papers, or dumb troll messages. I never got one from somebody who's interested in learning more about dragons of their own volition."

"You hear that, Hic? Of their own volition," Jack said, waggling his eyebrows at me. I knew what he was getting at. "Volition" was the sort of highfaluting word I would use in everyday conversation, marking me as a vocabulary snob. I could almost hear what he was thinking; "You two were meant for each other."

I shot him what I hoped was a surreptitious dirty look, before I said, "So, ah, you had something you wanted to show me, right?" I realized I was rubbing the back of my neck, something I usually only did when I was surpassingly uncomfortable, and I forced my hand down into my lap.

"Right!" Fishlegs said, glancing down reverently at the book he'd brought with him. "I found this in the historical archives at town hall," Jack squirmed in his seat, "and I just knew I had to show you." I leaned forward expectantly as he opened the creaky volume, flipping to a page he'd marked with a post-it. "It's sepia, and not very well focused, but I believe you'll find this image very intriguing," Fishlegs said, very close to smug as he turned the book around so that the two page spread was right-side-up for me.

My stomach dropped, and I felt a muted sense of disgust toward the ancient photograph displayed on the slightly warped glossy pages. Several proud-looking men with rifles stood around what was clearly a dead dragon, the poor creature laid out over what must have been fifty feet or more from wing-tip to wing-tip. A small caption underneath the photograph read, The Last Dragon, circa 1878. Some small part of me was grateful that its eyes were closed, but the overwhelming emotion I experienced was not one of enthusiasm, but revulsion. Some poor animal had been killed in cold blood, just because those Industrial Age douchebags thought it was dangerous.

I looked up at Fishlegs to see that he was watching me expectantly, and I managed a weak grin, "Yeah," I said, "That'sâ€¦great."

"I know, right?" he said, grabbing the book out from under my nose and flipping the page, "If you look at the article about it on the next page, they talk about how nobody could identify the species, but the local Native American tribe told them what it wasâ€¦a night fury. Only nobody believed them, and in the end it was just sort of lost in the shuffle. People back then weren't exactly concerned with preserving knowledge about dragons."

"Does anybody know where the skeleton is?" I asked, not because I really wanted to see it, but because having the bones of a supposedly non-existent species of dragon would sort of be a big deal.

"No," Fishlegs said, shaking his head woefully, "I looked and looked, but there's no other record of it. Not even the original picture,

just this one printed in the book. It wasn't kept for posterity's sake, that's for sure." I looked over at Jack, and saw that he had this forced look of interest on his face, but by the way his mouth was twitching I could tell he was trying very hard not to laugh.

I sighed, and sat back. "And you're sure it's a night fury?" I said. The old picture wasn't exactly infallible proof. The lighting was poor, and it was obvious that the old photo had degraded over time before it was copied into the book.

"Oh, I'm sure," Fishlegs said, furrowing his brow in an expression of fierce certainty.

I caught Jack giving me a look, his mouth slightly open in an expression of incredulity that quickly morphed back into a smile. "Hey, Fishlegs, what do you do for a living?" he asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Oh, I work at a comic book shop," he said, somewhat startled by the off-topic question.

"That is fantastic. Oof!" My friend glared, but gave no other indication that I'd just kicked him under the table.

"Anyway," I said, "That was sure, ah, interesting. Thanks for showing me." I left out the part where I didn't understand why he couldn't have just emailed me the picture. Of course I knew why, though. The guy was a nerd—he had a passion about something very weird and specific, and he had nobody else to share it with. That was something I could identify with pretty well, but at the same time meeting new people isn't exactly my thing. Therefore I felt my uneasiness was justifiable.

One painful hour later, Jack finally got tired of watching me squirm, and came up with a "viable" excuse for us to leave. "Hiccup here has a prostate exam in a half-an-hour, so we gotta split." I could have murdered him, but Fishlegs was wonderfully oblivious, and accepted the pretext without any outward signs of disbelief.

"Dude," Jack grinned as we walked down the crowded sidewalk toward his Jeep, "That guy was fucking awesome. Can we hang out with him again?"

"You're a real asshat, you know that?" I sneered, shoving him so that he narrowly avoided knocking into an innocent passerby.

"What?" he said, spreading his arms in an expression of mock guiltlessness. "I said he was awesome!"

"You're a shit."

"Come on, man! I was only screwing around," he said, grinning ear to ear, "I didn't mean anything by it."

"You were practically laughing right in his face!"

"Because of how awesome he was! I mean, he reminded me of you, and I laugh in your face all the time." I sighed and shook my head. No harm had been done, and I supposed he had a point.

"Whatever," I said as we reached the spot where he'd parked his jeep, just in time to watch the meter run out. "You could have at least tried not to be so amused. People don't typically like it when you laugh at the things they're into."

"Yeah, yeah. He didn't even notice, man," he said. I saw how he stood back, watching me as I climbed into the passenger seat just to make sure I didn't need help. "You're really kicking that leg's ass, man," he noted, sounding genuinely impressed with me.

I shrugged, waiting for him to run around to the other side and clamber in beside me before responding. "I'm glad it looks that way, because I feel like I'm the one getting my ass kicked."

"Nah, you got that thing," he said, pulling his sunglasses off the rearview and sticking them back on his head before jerking the jeep out into traffic. "I knew you would."

Jack's continued confidence in me admittedly made me feel as though I actually was making some sort of progress, both with my leg and my attitude. Ever since my father had flushed all my drugs, I'd been more irrationally irritable than ever before. Though I would never concede to actually doing so, I had taken some of Dr. Sanderson's advice about dealing with overwhelming situations. Rather than getting into a screaming match with my father over something annoying he'd done that I now couldn't recall, I'd walked out of the house and forced myself to take deep breaths until I didn't feel like killing anything anymore. When my leg had hurt so badly last night that I wanted nothing more than to cry, I'd laid in my bed with a cold compress until the pain wasn't quite so overpowering, listening to soft music and trying to clear my head.

Thinking about the doctor reminded me that I had an appointment with him the following day. The fact that his bullshit methods had some real world application rankled. But maybe that was part of my problem. I was holding onto a grudge toward psychologists in general because of one bad experience with a moron. If I couldn't let go of that, then what did that say about me?_ That you're petty, and childish_, a little voice whispered in the back of my head, sounding suspiciously like Jack.

"Let's drive by Gilding's," Jack said, not really as a suggestion. Sure enough, he was already headed that way, guiding the jeep along the congested streets of downtown toward the flower shop Rapunzel's mother ran. We had nowhere in particular to go, so I offered no objections. Luckily for him, Punz was outside, arranging a large display of flowers on the sidewalk. When Jack leaned on the horn, she jumped, looking up to see who was making all the racket.

"Hey, babe!" he shouted, waving eagerly, as if there was any way she couldn't have spotted him. Rather than looking embarrassed by his display, as I certainly was, Punz grinned and waved back. Somebody honked behind us, even though traffic was currently stalled, and we couldn't go forward anyway. Ignoring the impatient motorists, Jack shouted, "Your beauty shines with the light of a thousand suns! Seriously, my eyeballs are melting out of my head!"

"You're such a goof!" she shouted back.

"I'm a goof who loves you! Oh, shit," he jerked forward as traffic

began moving again, "See you tonight!" He gunned it, sending the jeep skidding ahead, though we only made it a block and a half before the flow of traffic stalled again. "What?" he said, grinning stupidly as I regarded him with a baleful stare.

"You disgust me," I told him.

"Don't be jealous of our love, Hiccup," he said, shaking a reproving finger under my nose, and then poking me in the face with it. I slapped my hand away, and the jeep lurched forward again. "Speaking of ladies," he said as we finally turned onto a side-street that wasn't clogged with drivers, "what up with you and the doctor's daughter?"

Damn it. I knew I shouldn't have told him about meeting Merida in the woods, but my stupid, fat mouth had betrayed me. I'd told him about needing to meet up with Fishlegs, and everything else had just sort of tumbled out.

"There's nothing 'up,'" I told him.

"You should ask her out, man."

"I barely know her."

"So? I barely knew Punz when we started going out," his tone lacked the usual teasing edge, which worried me. If he wasn't joking around, then that meant he was serious, and when Jack was serious, then that lead to unpleasant things for me. "Seriously, dude. I'm just saying." He didn't press the issue, which meant that he was going to bring it up again, later on. Perfect. Just fucking perfect.

How could he not get it? I didn't want to date anybody. I didn't want to go out with somebody, to like them, to kiss them, to feel their skin on mine, to fall in love with them, and think that we could be together forever, then have them leave. If Astrid hadn't broken up with me, I would have married her. I would have stayed with her for the rest of my life, because I'd been in love with her.

"You okay, Hic?" Jack asked, sounding worried.

I realized I had my eyes squeezed shut, my fingers probing my forehead. "I'mâ€|my leg hurts," I said. Of course it hurt. It always hurt. But that wasn't my only problem.

"I think I have an oxy in my bag of drugs," Jack said, "you can have it if you want."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's in the glovebox." Jack and his fucking "bag of drugs." Most of it is legal nowadays; stuff like aspirin and cough drops, but sometimes the odd acid tab or oxycodone finds its way inside. Once upon a time he would fence pills to the druggies at our high school, but he'd stopped because it was "too weird." And if Jack found something too perturbing to pursue, then you could damn well count on him to be right about it.

"How old is this thing?" I asked after fishing the pill out of the bag.

"Uhâ€¦Take it and find out?" he said unhelpfully. It didn't matter, I decided. "If your dad asks why you're loopy, don't tell him I gave you the stuff. He thinks I'm respectable now, I don't want to disillusion him."

"I'm not gonna get loopy from _one_ pill," I said. Just numb enough that I could ignore a few choice things that I didn't want to think about. That was really all I needed.

X

"Your physical therapy seems to be going well. You don't need crutches to walk anymore, and you're off painkillers now, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Your accident was in June, and now it's August already. You've come a long way in just two months."

"Juneâ€¦," I said, staring disinterestedly at my fingernails, "June feels likeâ€¦a thousand years ago."

"I imagine it does."

"It makes me feel old," I said.

"How so?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. It justâ€¦everything. All the tests, and therapy, and appointments, and questions. I feelâ€¦" I made a vague, frustrated gesture in the air, and Dr. Sanderson nodded, jotting something down on his notepad.

Today was a strange day. I had woken up feeling groggy, disoriented, and sick. It wasn't from taking bad medsâ€¦at least I didn't think so. I looked it up on my phone; taking expired medicine isn't usually dangerous. The drugs just tend to become less potent over time. I simply feltâ€¦defeated. Again. That feeling of "what's the point?" was back with a vengeance, taking all the fight out of me. As a result, I couldn't even put on the usual show for Dr. Sanderson. Perhaps I'd regret it later, but at the moment I didn't care.

"You seem sort of down today, Hiccup," he said, and I scoffed. "You know, uncontrollable changes in mood can be a sign of depression."

"I'm sure they can," I said. Speculation seemed just as pointless as everything else. Of course I was depressed. I didn't have any reason not to be.

"Has everything been going well at home?" Yeah, super except for the fact that my dad threw out my drugs, and now my leg hurts every second of the day.

I didn't feel like getting into that, though. Even in this state, thinking about my father was agitating. "Can I tell you something?" I asked, my traitorous tongue working of its own free will again.

"Anything," he sounded almost eager. It was a rare day that I wanted to tell him anything.

"When I was in the ravineâ€¦I thought I sawâ€¦" It would be stupid to tell him this, but I was tired of keeping it all in my own head. "I saw a dragon."

"You saw aâ€¦could you say that again?"

"_I saw a dragon_," I said, stressing each word as I tried to impress upon him that this wasn't something I had made up.

"What kind of dragon?"

"A night fury."

"I'm not familiar with that species."

"They wereâ€¦rare."

"Hiccup, you are aware that dragons are extinct."

"That doesn't mean anything. Have you ever heard of a Lazarus taxon?"

"Can't say that I have," he said, pursing his lips. I realized I was leaning forward, my posture insistent. I wasn't just trying to convince him, I knew. I was still trying to convince myself.

"Sometimes people think a species has gone extinct, only to have it reappear later. A Lazarus taxon. Usually it refers to animals found in the fossil record, but sometimesâ€¦" I trailed off, the desperate note in my voice seeming to hang in the air between the doctor and I.

"Hiccup, you were suffering from a head injury," he said slowly, "I don't thinkâ€¦"

"I didn't imagine it!" I snapped, my sudden, inexplicable anger so fierce that I wasn't even surprised by it. I was tired. So tired of people telling me how to feel, how to think. They weren't going to take this away from me.

"Well, I didn't say _that_â€¦perhaps you simplyâ€¦well, it might have been something _other_ than a dragonâ€¦," he was obviously flustered by my outburst. I had been acerbic before, but never aggressively so. He seemed to regain his composure quickly enough, and said, "There's a lot of indigenous wildlife in that area. Do you think it could have been a bear?"

I sat back on the couch, pinching the bridge of my nose. "No," I said, "It wasn't a bear." He didn't believe me. Of course he wouldn't believe me.

"Hiccup, I think you need a return to normalcy," he said after a tense moment. "I'm gonna recommend that you be cleared to return to work. I think it would do you some good to have a more standard routine." This announcement was an unexpected turn of events, that

was for sure, especially after my eruption. It was certainly off-putting enough to cut through some of my anger, effectively mollifying me, at least for the moment.

Of course, as soon as the anger dispersed, it was replaced by apprehension. If I went back to work, that meant facing the misguided sympathetic gestures of my coworkers. It would mean people asking me about the prosthetic, and about what happened. But at the same time it would be an excuse to get out of the house, away from my dad. If I wore regular pants, the customers wouldn't even know. And I much preferred dealing with people who were ignorant of my condition. When I had met with Fishlegs the day before, it had been enormously relieving not to have him glancing down at my prosthetic, or looking at me through a veil of pity.

My appointment ended twenty minutes later, the remaining time mostly eaten up by Sanderson reiterating his self-calming methods, and giving me advice on how to deal with questions and uncomfortable situations. Not that I asked him to, but in lieu of cooperation on my part he just likes to fill my ears with unwanted information.

I was halfway through the lobby when my phone began to ring, the call from Dr. DunBroch, which was odd enough that I answered rather than sending it straight to voicemail. "Hiccup, good news!" she told me, "Your prosthetic just came in! I know your next appointment is tomorrow, but I have an open spot in my schedule if you'd like to come in and try it on."

Even though I really wasn't in the mood, my leg was nagging me, and I figured what could be the harm? "I'm here now," I told her.

"Oh, that's right, you meet with Dr. Sanderson on Wednesdays. Well, come on up to my office. I'll see you in a few minutes!" Gosh, did she always have to be so pleasant? It was really hard to be annoyed with life in general when you were talking to somebody who was perpetually cheerful.

Dr. DunBroch was waiting for me, like she said she'd be. "Ah, yes," she said once the new prosthetic was firmly attached, "That's much better. Go on, try walking on it." Granted, it was much more comfortable than the temporary one; it didn't pinch, or chafe, but it was still a poor substitute for a real leg. "How does that feel?"

"Better," I acknowledged.

"Wonderful! Oh, I'm very proud of you, you know. Your recovery is progressing much faster than my original prognosis assumed."

"Thanks," I mumbled, made uncomfortable by her glowing praise.

"Your obstinate nature may have contributed to that, of course, but there's always something to be said for stubbornness," she said with an uncharacteristic wink. _Yeah, stubbornness, that was it_, I thought sarcastically.

"So is that all you needed me for, because I have things I need toâ€", "

Her office door burst open without warning, sending the heavy wooden obstruction banging into the doorstop on the wall. "Mum!" Merida gasped, bounding in without even taking notice of me, dressed in her riding clothes, messenger bag bouncing by her hip, "Dad sent me over to bring youâ€", "

"Merida, _how_ _many_ times_â€", "

"Mum, I can't argue right now, I _have_ to get to work, and you forgot your lunch this morning, so dad asked me to bring it to you at the last minute, andâ€", " she stopped in mid-sentence, catching on to the way her mother was alternating between glaring at her and glancing ruefully at me. With wide eyes, Merida spun, looking like she might apologize. Until she saw it was me. "Ugh, _really?!_" she huffed, "Why are you always lurking about wherever I go!"

"Me?" I said, gesturing to myself, "You're the one who rode a _horse_ into my backyard!"

"I didn't _ride_ him, I was walking!" she snapped. I didn't understand why _she_ was so peeved, but it got me irked right back at her.

"Oh, whatever! If I didn't know any better I'd say you were stalking me!"

"Please, I have better things to do than follow you around, you besom!"

"Merida!" Dr. DunBroch's admonishing voice interjected her daughter's name, cutting our impromptu argument short, "I will not have you barging into my office and antagonizing my patients! Out with you! _Now_!" Merida glared at me for a moment more, then with a noise like an angry badger, she dropped her mother's lunch on her desk and about-faced, storming out of the room. "Good Lord in Heaven," her mother sighed once the door had swung shut behind her. "You must forgive her, Hiccup. My daughter can be quite hot-headed, in case you hadn't noticed."

"No, I noticed," I said curtly. What was her damn problem, anyway? I hadn't said anything overly rude to her the last time we'd met, had I? Shit, I couldn't really remember, actually. Maybe I had. But that didn't mean she had to be a fucking lunatic.

Dr. DunBroch heaved a long-suffering sigh, and told me I could be on my way. "Call me if you have any issues before tomorrow," she said, taking a seat and reaching for the bag her daughter had left for her.

As I headed back downstairs, I checked my phone, and responded to my messages. Jack wanted to know if I wanted to go see some band I'd never heard of at the House of Blues on Saturday with him and Punz, my dad had sent me a poorly spelled text that I could not decipher, and a few other people I didn't care to deal with had sent me ambiguous messages inquiring as to the state of my health. By the time I made the front walk way, I was concentrating on coming up with a word that would crush Punz's score in Words With Friends, so I didn't notice Merida almost until I walked right into her.

"Dammit!" I heard her fuming, and I looked up from my phone to see

her standing on the curb three feet away, stomping a foot against the pavement.

"Something wrong?" I blurted before I had a chance to think.

She rounded on me, her crown of curls swirling about wildly. "Why, no!" she snapped, "There's nothing wrong, aside from my bloody taxi taking off without me! I knew I shouldna paid him before I got out! Ugh! I'm going to be late for work, again!" To my utter dismay, her voice began to crack toward the end, and her eyes appeared to be brimming with furious tears. "This is just perfect!" she snapped, swinging around. "I get my first job, and they just have to do their utmost to ruin it for me!"

"Uh, who's 'they?'" I asked tentatively.

"My family! Who else?" she fairly spat.

Before I could stop myself, I found the following words come charging out of my mouth, "Well, if you want I could give you, uh, a ride?"

For some reason when she turned back, I cringed, as if expecting another tirade. But she just looked at me, eyes wide with surprise, and hopeful gratitude, "You'd do that?"

"Uh, sure?" I'd been remiss to ride over with my dad today, so I'd sucked it up and taken my own car. Now that I was off my meds, driving wasn't so terrifying a prospect, though I'd had both hands white-knuckled on the wheel the whole way. Even if I hadn't exactly been cleared to drive by Dr. DunBroch, it was better than suffering an awkward car-ride with my father.

To my utter horror, Merida rushed forward and threw her arms around me, embracing me as though I'd just rescued her from certain doom rather than simply offered her a ride to work. "Oh, thank you!" she said, either not noticing or ignoring the way I stiffened in her arms. It took some careful maneuvering to extricate myself from her grip, and then we were crossing the parking lot, headed toward my car.

"This is your car?" she breathed, sounding disbelieving as I unlocked the driver door.

"Yeah," I said.

"My dad would have a fit over this thing," she told me, settling into the passenger seat almost reverently. "Where did you get it?"

"Uh, my dad's a mechanic. I, uh, got it from him."

"Oh, you're so lucky! I've been begging my parents for a car, but I'm lucky if they'll even let me borrow one of theirs!" she said, clenching her fists in her lap.

My answer to that was several minutes of uncomfortable silence, though the uncomfortable part seemed to be lost on her as she scowled through the windshield. I was navigating the Chevy through the back streets, avoiding lunchtime traffic as we made our way toward campus when she finally spoke up. "I'm sorry, by the way. For blowing up at

you."

"Oh. Don't worry about it," I said, somehow knowing that she wasn't going to leave it at that.

"I was just frustrated," she said, "And it was over something stupid. I mean, my dad called me and told me an hour before I had to be at work that mum forgot her lunch in the fridge, and insisted that I bring it to her, as if she couldn't bloody well just buy something in the cafeteria. Honestly, they act like the things that I have to do are somehow less important just because I'm a 'kid.'"

The statement hit home for me, as I could definitely relate. "I know what you mean," I said, feeling twinge of youthful resentment toward my father. "My dad used to pull that kind of crap all the time whenâ€¦well, before all this shit started."

"I just don't understand it," she sighed, "I'm eighteen. I'm not a baby anymore. But ever since we moved here they've just gotten worse about it, as if they're afraid America will corrupt me somehow."

"Oh, well, that actually might be a legitimate concern," I said, "I mean, I was born here, and look at how I turned out." Wonders never cease, it seems, as she giggled, and I swear I saw her blush before she turned and concentrated a little too hard on staring out the window.

B.U. was essentially deserted during the summer, except for the relatively few students enrolled in summer programs, and the sluggish businesses that stayed open during the off-season. I was able to find my way around until we reached the agricultural side of campus. My expectations of a ghost down were dashed, as I saw the fields populated with workers, kids with clipboards taking soil samples, and leading one type of animal or another. We had to stop to allow a guy to tug a stubborn cow across the road, then Merida directed me to a cluster of low buildings. With my windows down, the smell of farm animals was strong in the air, but Merida seemed unaffected. I pulled off into a gravel drive, and parked as she hurriedly threw off her seatbelt.

"Oh, wait," she said, already halfway out of the car as she twisted around and began digging in her bag.

"What?" I said, worried that she'd forgotten something important.

"Just a sec," she said, pulling out a small notepad pen and scribbling something furiously across a piece of paper. I sat, dumbfounded, as she tore the sheet loose and turned, grabbing my arm and stuffing it into my hand. "There!" she said, "I'll see you, Hiccup. Thanks again for driving me!" Before I could respond, she leapt out of my car, slammed the door, and then was running flat out toward the nearest building.

I was almost too scared to look and see what she'd written on the notepaper, even though I already knew there was only one thing that it could be. Sure enough, it was her phone number, and a hastily scrawled, You'd better call me, jerk!

To put it lightly, I was horrified. Jack was never going to shut up about this.

9. Chapter 9

I'm sorry this took so long, especially for it to have turned out as short as it is. It was actually nearly twenty pages, but it started to feel incongruous, so I cut it short, and shuffled the rest off into the next chapter. I had some issues this past week, and barely had any time to write, and when I did it felt more like slogging than writing. Then when I did finally have some extended time to myself, I wound up with a swollen tonsil, which triggered a panic attack because I thought my throat was closing and that I was about to die.

I am a ridiculous human being. Here's some fluff for you, ilu all.
slowly sinks back into the shadows

X

"This is the greatest day of my life." It was a good thing Jack was happy, because I most certainly was not. In fact, I was beset by such utter turmoil and indecision that it was affecting me physically. Why, God, why did she have to give me her phone number?

"I think I'm having a heart attack," I said, fingers twisted into my hair as I sat hunched over on the front stoop of the apartment building I had once lived within.

"Quit being so melodramatic," Jack scoffed, "Come on, man. This is a glorious moment!" I felt him plop himself down beside me, one of his arms clamping menacingly around my shoulders as he spoke in a proud, choked up voice, "My little man, off finding girls that I didn't have to coerce him into talking to."

"What should I do?" I asked, looking up at him, feeling how comically wide my eyes were and not caring. On some level I knew my reaction was disproportionate to the stimulus, but that didn't really seem to matter at the moment. I had no idea how to handle this turns of events. As soon as I had gathered enough of my wits about me to back my car out of that gravel lot, I had driven straight over to Jack's place to ask him.

I should have known better than to tell him anything about it.

"Uh, _dur_, call her you idiot!" he said, slapping me lightly upside the head, and then jumping back up to his feet with a spritely energy. When Jack is excited or agitated, it's hard for him to sit still—he has to tear about like an overstimulated Chihuahua, which in my overwrought state was incredibly taxing to endure. "Call her and ask her—hey! Oh my God! Dude, ask her to come with us on Saturday!"

"With us where?" I asked.

"The House of Blues!" he crowed, eyes lit up with manic glee. "Punz can get us extra tickets from that Flynn douche. It'll be awesome!"

"Oh," I responded, less than enthused. I had already forgotten about the text he'd sent me earlierâ€"that particular bit of information had been lost in the mad rush that had followed.

"Don't 'oh' me, Haddock. This is happening. I can feel it. It's going to be legenâ€", " he stopped there, dramatically jabbing a finger in my direction with a deadly serious look on his face.

I sighed heavily, throwing in an eye roll for good measure before finishing for him, "_Dary_. Legen_dary_, Jack. Jesus Jones, you're not Barney Stinson."

"Not _yet_ anyway," he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he switched to a more serious tone, "But I swear, Hiccup, if you don't call her, _I'm_ gonna call her, and you're not gonna like it if _I_ have to call her."

He wasn't joking, and I cursed myself for ever showing him the torn piece of notepaper with her number on it. He had asked to see it, examining it as if he thought it was some sort of forgery I'd constructed to screw with him. I unfolded it in my hands nowâ€"it had crumpled, slightly, but the numbers were still legible. Merida had fast, scratchy handwriting, her letters and figures not neat or uniform in the least, but still somehow readable. I caught myself following the untidy curves of her digits and hastily refolded the paper as a slow heat crept up the back of my neck.

"Look, Jack, I don't even know if _I_ wanna go to this thing," I said, hoping to sidestep the entire situation entirely.

"You're going if I have to stuff you in a sack and drag you there," he said, eyes sparking with vehemence.

"Jackâ€", "

"Dude, you _need_ to go, okay? You need to do something normal. If you just shut yourself up in your room forever, wallowing around and feeling sorry for yourself, then you're just gonna turn into a sad husk, and nobody will want to friends with you." His words rang true, and echoed Dr. Sanderson's sentiment from the day before. Normalcy. It seemed nigh unattainable at this point, but his words reminded me that I was supposed to be _trying_.

"Okay," I relented. I was going to do it. I was going to go to the concert, and I was going to call Merida. Maybe. I had to. Hell, she _wanted_ me to. And I couldn't let Jack call her for me; that would be mortifying. But what would I say? How was I supposed to ask her out? I couldn't remember how exactly one went about asking a girl on a date, it had been _three years_ since I'd even tried, my voice and hands and whole body shaking as I asked Astrid if she wanted to go see a movie. We'd hung out dozens of times by that point, but that time it was different, and we both knew it. She'd grinned wryly at the way my voice cracked, and said, "Only if you're paying, Casanova." It had taken me literally my entire life to work up the nerve to ask my first girlfriend on a date. How was I supposed to ask Merida out by Saturday night?

"You're being dumb," I said to myself later as I sat in my bedroom, door shut to keep my father's prying eyes at bay. My phone sat on the desk beside my bed, silently mocking me. "You're nineteen, Hiccup.

You're an adultâ€¦basically." This was impossible.

Hadn't I just been thinking yesterday that I didn't want to do something like this? The very thought of even trying to engage in a romantic relationship with another human being had practically been nauseating. Now the thought of calling Merida and asking her to come with me to a concert headlined by some obscure band filled me with a terrific sort of terror.

Terror that was followed immediately by a tidal wave of self-doubt and insecurity. Why exactly had Merida given me her number? Why did she chew me out one minute, and then blush and giggle the next? What in the world did she like about me, the goofy nerd with one leg?

Things had been easy with Astrid. I always knew where I stood with her, because she came right out and told me how she was feeling. She was always direct, never evasive unless she was trying to flirt with me, and then it had always seemed so obvious. Or maybe in the year since she'd dumped me I'd just forgotten how to interact with women altogether.

In all of that time I have been on exactly two "dates," and both of those times were utter disasters. The first girl, whose name was Cora, was literally a random girl Jack found at a party and made me hang out with. This had been before he met Punz, and he was getting tired of the party life, but not so tired that he didn't spend an entire week pestering me to come with him and let him "hook me up." Cora had been less than impressed with my vast knowledge of mechanical engineering, which for some reason had been the only thing I could think of to talk about. In the end she'd gotten bored and disappeared, and I'd simply gone home for lack of anything better to do.

The next had been no better. Rapunzel had insisted that her friend Sasha would be perfect for me, because Sasha was smart and funny, and Sasha just loved animals, just like me. Well, it turned out Sasha was also a hardcore vegan, and nobody told me, so when I ordered a burger she'd immediately begun haranguing me for being so inconsiderate, and also a murderer. According to Punz, Sasha still complains about how horrible I was, even though I barely said two words to her aside from, "I'm sorry," over and over again. Really, I don't want to criticize anybody's lifestyles, because to each her own. I'm just saying I would have ordered a salad if I'd been forewarned.

My jaw began to ache and I realized I was grinding my teeth; it took a monumental effort to unclench them. Then I nearly fell off the edge of my bed as my phone buzzed against the hard surface of the desk, and I grabbed it with trembling fingers.

I had a text, from Jack of course. **U didn't call her yet did u**

Ignoring him would do me no good at this point._**I'm working up to it.**_

Hiccup I stg

**Don't rush me.**

**If u don't text me back within the next half hr n tell me u called her I'm gonna call her. **

N don't think u can be cute n say u'll just lie cuz we both kno u won't u spineless man-baby

Well I'm waiting u think I'm joking I'm not joking I will make u regret the day u were ever born

**Stop texting me dammit, I can't concentrate! **

Perhaps it was ridiculous that I needed to concentrate, but I'm the type of guy who has to rehearse what he's going to say five or twenty times before he orders a pizza over the phone. This was slightly more harrowing than that. _Okay_, I thought, phone in hand, _just do it._ _Don't think about it. Try to be like Jack_. He rarely thinks before he does something, which is probably why he's so much more content with life than I am. His entire life is composed of a series of spontaneous decisions, whereas mine was structured around extensive consideration and careful planning, and look at which of us was better off.

Dammit, you're thinking again, stop it! I could think myself in circles, worrying myself into a tizzy with my overactive imagination. I could picture every stupid thing I could possibly think to say, picture her realizing she'd made a huge mistake and never speaking to me again because I'm so socially hopeless it's not even funny.

I looked at my bedside clock and saw that I had approximately ten minutes before Jack's deadline expired. Fuck it. Before I could second-guess myself again, I stabbed her number into the touch pad and hit the little green phone icon. _Dear God, what have I done?_ I thought as the line began to ring. Was it too late to hang up, go outside, and dig a hole to bury myself in?

"'ello?" Merida's sleepy voice greeted me thickly.

Oh, God, it was eleven thirty at night, what the hell was I doing calling her at this hour? Just because I was a creepy little weirdo that liked to stay up all night didn't mean that she was too. "H-hi," I stuttered, "I, um, hi."

"Hiccup?" she said, sounding a little more alert, "Oh, shite, I fell asleep watching Sharknado."

Shockingly, I heard myself laughing, "I see you've got quality taste in cinema."

"Oh, shut it," she scoffed, tone light, "I said I _fell asleep_, didn't I?"

"Yeah, okay. I'm sure you weren't utterly absorbed in the dense layers of plot and compelling narrative."

"Hey, it was the only thing on, alright?" she insisted. "And I thought there would be more tornadoes with sharks, but I think I missed that part."

"Well, that's just a darn shame." Silence fell for a moment, and I

could hear her moving around. I took a deep breath, and started to form the question I'd called her to ask.

"So what're you up to this fine evening?" she said before I'd managed to get the first syllable out of my mouth.

"Oh, nothing, I just, I wanted to call you toâ€", "

"Hiccup?" My father's voice sounded from the other side of my closed door, possibly loud enough to be heard over the phone.

"Ugh, hang onâ€"yeah dad?" I said, standing too quickly and sending a jolt of pain through my leg that I readily ignored. I opened the door a crack, to find him standing outside looking perturbed.

"What're ye doing in there?" he asked.

"Uh, I'm on the phone," I said tersely, waving the device next to my ear.

"Oh, I, ahâ€"thought ye were talking to yerself."

"Okay, dad," I said, "Well, I wasn't, soâ€"thanks." I shut the door, and returned to my bed, muttering as Merida giggled in my ear.

"Why would he think you were talking to yourself?" she asked.

"I dunno, he's been weird ever since I moved back in," I huffed.

"I'm sure he's just worried about you," she said reasonably, "Then again, that isn't always a good thing."

"You're telling me," I said, bracing myself, "So, anywayâ€", "

A resounding crash came through the earpiece, nearly making me drop my phone as I jerked it away from my head. For a moment I could hear Merida's muffled voice shouting something, and I realized she must have her hand over the speaker to keep me from hearing what she was saying. If she was as angry as she sounded, then I decided I was grateful for her foresight.

"Dammit, ugh, I'm sorry. My brothers knocked the bookcase over in their room. Again," she said, sounding both exasperated and resigned.

"How old are they?"

"Eight. They're triplets. Did I mention that? They're a veritable Trio of Terror," she sighed. Then, "Do you have any siblings?"

"Not that I know of."

"Lucky bastard," she said with mock envy.

"They can't be that bad."

"One day I woke up and my hair was braided around the rungs of the headboard."

"The _fiends_," I said with a scandalized gasp, "Please, my friend Jack used to do way worse than that to me when we were kids."

"Oh, like what?"

"Well, once he brought me a glass of milk that was actually laced with a liquid diuretic."

"_Pfft_."

"Don't 'pfft' I had to go to the hospital! I drank the whole thing and I got dehydrated."

"If that's the best you got, then I've got to say I'm disappointed."

"Okay, okayâ€|alright, here's a good one. One time he convinced me my house was haunted."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. He spent like a year just dropping these little hints, and messing with stuff in my house so that I began to think something weird was going on. Then one day he told me he saw a woman in a white dress in my kitchen, and he said that she didn't have any eyes, and he looked really freaked out so I believed him. Then, he slept over one night when my dad was gone, and I woke up in the middle of the night and the ghost woman was in my room, and I nearly had a fucking heart attack and died, until Jack broke down and started laughing and I realized it was just him in a dress. Then I tried to kill him."

"Oh my God," she was laughing, "That is hysterical! How old were you, like six?"

"No, this was only like five years ago." This statement prompted her to into a fit of uncontrollable laughter that lasted a good five minutes.

"You really believed your house was haunted, that's hilarious! I can't breathe!"

"Yeah, ha ha, I still have nightmares that somebody's in my room with me," I said dryly.

"Oh, you poor thing. Shall I come and stand watch while you sleep?"

"It _would_ make me feel better," I said.

"So, whâ€|oh, hold on, I have another call."

"Wait! Is it somebody you know?"

"No, why?" I recounted Jack's phone number, and she responded with a surprised, "How'd you know?"

"That's Jack. He, ah, got a hold of your number, and, well, he sort of threatened that if I didn't call you then he would." The words seemed to stumble awkwardly out of my mouth, and I hoped I didn't

sound as stupid as I felt.

"Why would he do that?"

"Well, because, ah, it'sâ€¦there's this thing, on Saturday, and heâ€¦I _wanted to ask if you wanted to go."

"Depends on what sort of a 'thing' it is," she said, a tad cheekily.

"It's a concert, at the House of Blues. Some band I've never heard of, but his girlfriend's friend is opening for them, soâ€¦" I trailed off helplessly. I hadn't come off anywhere near as cool and collected as I had wanted, but at least I'd given my best shot. If she'd said no, I wouldn't have held it against her.

"I'll have to ask my parents," she said, coming across as almost gloomy, "But I'd really love to."

"You would?"

"Don't sound so shocked, now. Has a girl never said yes to you before?"

"No. I mean, not no."

She giggled, and said, "I'll ask my mum. She likes you, so I'm sure she'll say yes. My dad'll be the tricky one this time. He thinks boys are like wild beasts."

"Well, Jack's girlfriendâ€¦"she was the blonde girl you met at the hospitalâ€¦"she'll be there to keep us in line."

"As though I couldn't keep you in line myself," she tsked. Before I could respond to that, she swore under her breath, and said, "Speaking of parents, my mum is calling me. She doesn't like me staying up too late." I could practically hear her rolling her eyes. "I'll call you tomorrow to let you know what they say, alright?"

"Okay."

"Bye, Hiccup."

"Bye."

My phone blipped, letting me know the call had ended. I leaned to the side, dropping my face into my pillow, only realizing now that my heart was pounding. Barely three seconds passed before my phone was ringing, and for a moment I thought it might be Merida calling me back already, but once again it was Jack.

"What happened?!"

"Can you not yell in my ear?"

"I'll yell all I fucking want, you fuck, _tell me what happened_!"

"She said she'll ask her parents."

"_And_?"

"And what?"

"What the fuck else were you talking about?! I gave you an extra ten minutes because I know you're a wuss, and you were still on the phone with her, so you didn't just sit there listening to each other breathe the whole timeâ€|did you?"

"_No_. We just talked aboutâ€|stuff."

"Ugh, you're the worst kind of person, you know that?"

"And _you_ are way too involved in my life."

"If I wasn't you'd just fuse physically with your bed until you became some sort of horrible bed-human hybrid. You're lucky I'm such a meddlesome asshole. Right, Punz?" I heard Punz agree distractedly, like she was sitting nearby and not actually paying attention to what he was saying. "See?" he said smugly.

"Whatever." I tried to sound nonchalant, unaffected by it all, but I don't think I was fooling anybody. I was glad there was no one around who could see me, because I couldn't wipe the smile off of my face.

X

Thank you guys for reading. It really does mean a lot to me :)

10. Chapter 10

What is happening. Why is this chapter so long. I tried my best to curtail the length, but it just got away from me. I hope it doesn't make the rest of the story seem unbalanced D: There was just a lot of stuff I wanted to fit in, and then the characters wouldn't shut the fuck up, so here you go, I'm so sorry *flies into the sun*

x

"You're sure about this son?" My dad sounded anxious, and frankly, it was getting on my nerves.

"Yes, dad," I said starkly, "This isn't exactly the first concert I've ever been to."

"I know, it's justâ€|your leg."

"I'll be fine," I insisted, teetering on the edge of complete exasperation as I tugged on my coat. It was seven, and the show didn't start for another two hours. The evening breeze promised cooler weather to come, and I didn't want to be stuck waiting in some line in the cold.

"You're certain?" he asked me, tone deepening to show that he didn't appreciate my insolence.

Unable to resist, I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling, and scoffed, "Yes, dad. I'm certain. It's not like it's gonna fall off again."

"Now, there's no need for that," he growled, "I'm just trying to look out for ye, son."

"Well, thanks dad, but I can look out for myself." I didn't want to argue with him. I didn't want my mood to be soured for tonight. We had been going back and forth like this since I'd told him my plans yesterday afternoon, and it was becoming exhausting. I knew I shouldn't have told him at all.

Once upon a time if I had told him I was going out, that I wouldn't be back until early morning, he wouldn't have batted an eyelash. When I was in high school I preferred quiet nights to parties, but I had been to my fair share, and I think my dad was always relieved to see me go. I had never exactly been popular, but neither had I been completely unknown, a wallflower. I had my friends, and people at least knew of me, what with my involvement in the honor society, and the drama club, and my status as school tutor. When somebody needed help with some project, or studying, or anything academically related they always came to me, and I was at least decently regarded in this respect.

So it was that my father rarely questioned my outings at all. Sometimes I didn't even tell him where I was goingâ€”I would just leave. Jack had said at the time that I was lucky. I never had a curfew that wasn't self-imposed, and I could have stayed out all night without him so much as calling to check in with me. I think he was grateful that I wasn't a total lonerâ€”loserâ€”and I knew why. When he was my age he'd been a total raving madman, partying hard all the time. Having a son that could not and had no interest in playing sports, had very little luck with the ladies, and was a complete social pariah might have been too much for him to bear.

"Hiccup, justâ€¦listen, sonâ€¦",

A horn honked outside, my salvation a menacing black van with a fireball stenciled on the side. Normally I wouldn't have been too pleased to find that monstrosity parked outside my house, but right now I was only grateful. "Sorry, dad, gotta go," I said, then, taking pity on him, "I'll take it easy, alright?"

Before he could respond, I was out the door, not jogging but walking as quickly as I could manage toward the Van of Doom. When Jack had told me who would be driving us to the concert, I had balked. "Aster? That crazy Australian fucker?" The image of the man in question had come to mindâ€”a dizzyingly tall individual, taller even than myself, with a short Mohawk, disc earrings, and every available inch of skin covered in elaborate tribal tattoos. He was brash, loud, and opinionated, and completely nuts.

"He's not that crazy."

"He's crazy enough! Why is he even coming?!"

"Because, he gets the fake I.D.s, and I didn't have any money to pay him, so Punz got him an extra ticket. And, he's the only one with a big enough ride for all of us."

"Wait, who's 'all of us?'"

"Well, me, you, Punz, Merida, Aster, then Ruff and Tuff are coming, and Ruff's fiancée",

"Oh, great, so you invited all the most psychotic people we know. That's just dandy."

"Hey, at least we know it won't be a boring night." This sentiment brought me little comfort. Boring the night would not be, but there's a line between excitement, and "shit, the cops are here."

I pried open the side door of Aster's van, and climbed in, instantly met with the lingering scent of cigarettes and the underlying tones of weed. Well, the night was already off to a great start, wasn't it? "Hiccup!" Aster said, not turning around but watching me in the rearview through a pair of dark-rimmed glasses, "How ya goin', mate?"

"Swell," I responded blandly, eliciting a short, barking laugh from the Aussie.

"I see your predicament hasn't stunted your glowing personality," he chortled.

"Nah, he's just the same old ray of sunshine he always was," Jack said, twisting in the passenger seat to grin at me.

"Yup, that's me," I said, resulting in another round of laughter at my expense. I buckled myself in securely. "Aster is no better a driver than Jack, despite the fact that he's nearly three years older than us. The two of them worked together at the same record store, and alternately despised and respected one another. As contentious as the two of them can be at times, I've rarely seen somebody Jack relies on as much as Aster, aside from myself, of course. Despite being the sort of person I would normally distrust around my easily influenced friend, Aster has proved that he isn't as self-destructive and volatile as he initially comes across. He has a weird sense of honor, and regardless of his party-animal nature I knew that if he was driving then that meant he wouldn't touch a drop of alcohol. Tonight he would be the one in charge of keeping the rest of us in line, and he would do so without complaint.

Of course, all of that doesn't mean he isn't absolutely out of his fucking mind. No sooner had we pulled away from the curb than he pressed a few buttons on his radio, prompting a screeching, discordant cacophony to pour forth from every speaker in the van. I myself have never understood the appeal of metal, but Aster lives and dies by his choice of music, and Jack has a passing interest, so I knew I was outnumbered for the moment.

"Where's Punz?" I asked, leaning forward and shouting so Jack could hear me. To his credit, Aster saw we were trying to talk and turned the volume down a decibel or two.

"She's with Merida," he said.

"What? How?"

"She called her," he answered with a shrug, "She offered to help her get ready, and I think they wanted to talk shit about us, soâ€¦"

"Punz doesn't talk shit," I scoffed.

"Not in the way that us common rabble do, but believe me man, Punz can talk a fucking shit _storm_."

Well, that was worrying. "She's notâ€¦she's not gonna tell her anythingâ€¦",

"Embarrassing? Oh, you'd better believe it," he said, raising his brow with a wicked smirk. "Relax, Hic. She just wanted to get a chance to get to know her."

"You sent her over, didn't you?" I asked accusingly, "This is some kind of interrogation thing, isn't it?"

"One of the dangers of having friends," Jack informed me, as though it were a very simple matter. "Look, don't worry, alright. Punz won't _totally_ make her regret agreeing to come tonight."

"I hate you."

"Ah, you little mites and your girl troubles. You're adorable," Aster snickered as he swerved through traffic, "Ah, bloody hell, watch it you whacker!" He leaned on the horn, and I sat back, holding onto the edge of my seat for dear life.

Merida had given me her address, and I was mildly concerned that the neighborhood we found ourselves in was one of the higher end parts of town. The houses here were huge, elegant affairs, not quite McMansions, but still nicer than mine, and I don't exactly live in a shithole. "Damn, her folks must be loaded. Good for you, mate," Aster said, sounding impressed, "You boys sure know how to pick 'em, ay Jackie?"

"I love Punz for her personality, not her parents enormous bank vault full of money," Jack said, only half joking. One of the things he'd been worried about in dating a girl with rich parents was that they would reject him purely for the fact that he'd grown up with virtually nothing. He'd been terrified of eventually meeting them, certain that they'd think he was some sort of gold-digger. Of course, he needn't have worried. Punz's parents sounded just as saccharine as the girl herself was.

"Still, doesn't hurt, does it? Neither of these girls happen to have a sister, do they? No? Ah, what a shame," the Aussie sighed mournfully. "But, you're right, money isn't important. I mean, look at me, I'm broke as fuck, and I'm still pretty much perfect in all other aspects."

"Yeah, you're a perfect asshole," Jack snorted.

"Oy, nobody asked you, did they?!"

We pulled up in front of Merida's house, and I felt frozen to my seat. The lawn was a vast expanse that swept up to a large, craftsman style home, built with a cobblestone exterior that made the imposing

structure look more like a fortress than a house. There were creeping vines and moss growing up the sides, and huge windows that showed a well-decorated, inviting interior.

"Dude," Jack said, snapping me back to attention, "Go up to the door. You want her dad to think you're some kind of caveman?"

Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Merida still lived with her parents, so I would have no choice but to meet her dad, here and now. "Can you just kill me instead?"

"Go!" he said, unbuckling his seatbelt as if he meant to come back and throw me bodily from the vehicle. Before he could, I freed myself and clambered out, nearly tripping over the curb before I managed to right myself. My leg was twinging slightly, as though in warning as I made my way up the front walk. To my surprise, Jack joined me, and I was about to tell him I didn't need back-up, but then I remembered Punz was here as well. That was her Prius parked in the driveway, and I could hear her laughing through an open upstairs window. The tinkering, gentle sound was ominous in the night air.

The front door was up a set of steps, wreathed in hedges that made my sinuses itch. Oh, good, if I had an allergy attack and sneezed all over Merida's father, then that would really make a great first impression. "You ready?" Jack asked. I smoothed the front of my shirt, adjusting my open jacket self-consciously and patting down my hair—it had taken me an inordinate amount of time to get ready that evening. I was very worried about looking presentable, and had worn the simplest outfit I possibly could. A plain green t-shirt, with a plaid button up, and my coat and jeans. Of course my leg was covered up, and I'd taken some extra strength Tylenol, so hopefully I would be—"It was a rhetorical question, man. Just relax. You're a nice guy. And not like one of those fake nice guys who pretends to be nice and wears a fedora to hide his douchiness, but actually nice."

"Thanks, Jack. That makes me feel a lot better." My sarcasm seemed to fall flat; I could hear the way my voice seemed to be pitched slightly higher than normal, which was really not something I needed. As if I didn't already sound nasally enough.

"You know me. I'm here to help," he said, grinning as he reached up and pressed the doorbell. We could hear it echoing inside, followed a moment later by what sounded like a stampede of rhinoceroses. There was a scrambling on the other side of the entrance, and then the interior door creaked inward, revealing a cluster of small, red-headed boys. "Uh, hi guys," Jack said, sounding unnerved by the way they stared.

"You're here for our sister," the foremost triplet said, expression unwavering. It wasn't a question.

Jack and I exchanged glances, but thankfully we were rescued a moment later, the door swinging open further, revealing Dr. DunBroch. "Go on, boys," she said, shooing the triplets away. Even though I knew she lived here, it was still somewhat disorienting to see her outside of the hospital, and dressed in normal clothing. The trio scuttled off, tripping over one another as they disappeared down the front hall, shouting and shooting looks back at us over their shoulders. "Well, come in!" the doctor beckoned, and Jack obliged by pulling

open the storm door and stepping inside.

"Dr. DunBroch," I said, "This is my friend Jack."

"Nice to meet you, dear. And please, we've known each other long enough to be on a first name basis" it's Elinor."

"Oh" okay." I wasn't sure if I should be pleased with this new development or not. Dr. DunBroch "Elinor", always had a smile at the ready, but now it seemed different. More _familiar_. What if she really liked the idea of me dating her daughter? Maybe she thought we would go well together, but if that were true, and things went badly, what would happen? Would she refuse to treat me any longer? Would

No, stop thinking. If I started overthinking things now, everything would just go downhill. It was just one night out. I had to remember that.

"I'll go fetch the girls for you. You boys can make yourself at home." She slipped through a doorway, and up a flight of stairs, disappearing from view a moment later.

"Damn, dude," Jack whispered as we headed down the hallway that lead to a large, classically decorated living room. "Don't touch anything."

"Why would I touch anything?"

"Just don't, okay? Everything in here is worth more than our lives combined." With this in mind, I perched as delicately on the edge of the couch as I could. It was upholstered in some sort of expensive fabric, probably not available anywhere on Earth. Everything in the room was made of polished wood, what looked like original oil paintings were hung on each wall, and there was a disconcerting amount of porcelain adorning nearly every surface. Hung above the fireplace was a large white and blue rectangle of cloth, which I immediately recognized as the Scottish flag. I have too many insane Scottish nationalists in my family to not have known it for what it was, even though my family's primary lineage is Scandinavian.

All in all, I felt more like an intruder than a welcome guest. The DunBrochs had so many obviously expensive belongings, and the family portraits hung on the wall only served as a reminder that I was a stranger here. However, if I had thought that I was as uncomfortable as I possibly could be, I was wrong.

A shadow filled the doorway, so eerily reminiscent of the way that my father looms through an entry that I tensed, some part of me expecting it to be him come to finish our argument from earlier. It wasn't him, though. That was absurd. No, the man filling the doorway was huge like my father, but he wasn't nearly as beardy, his nose too large and crooked, undercut by an expansive moustache, and his expression was "surprisingly" pleasant.

Still, his sudden appearance had me sitting up ramrod straight, my hands clutched tightly together in my lap. Jack "the suave motherfucker" got almost casually to his feet as the man who was obviously Merida's father ambled easily over to us. I followed suit almost mechanically as Jack offered him a greeting that I also

nervously echoed.

"Mr. DunBroch, I presume?" Jack said, putting on his now-practiced respectable young man smile. "I'm Jack."

"Ah, Miss Rapunzel's boy, eh? That must make you Hiccup," he said, addressing me as he shook Jack's hand.

"Y-yes sir," I said, hoping my quick stutter went unnoticed. I braced myself for a bone-crushing handshake, but Mr. DunBroch's grip was astonishingly non-bruising, but still firm.

"Ach, no need for all this 'sir' business. You're a patient of my wife's, and a friend to my little girl. Fergus will do ya just fine," he said with a well-meaning air. I was understandably taken aback by this welcoming attitude. By Merida's descriptions of her home life I had been expecting two overprotective, overbearing parents who would treat me like a thief in the night, come to steal their daughter away. Not these two friendly, hospitable people who insisted that I call them by their first names.

We took our seats again on the sofa as Fergus collapsed into an adjacent arm chair, sighing and rubbing his knee. "So, where was it you kids were headed again, tonight?"

"House of Blues," Jack said, "Punz's friend got us tickets to this show his band is opening for."

"How late do these things tend to go?" the enormous man asked.

Ever the tactician, Jack gave him an answer that was neither a lie, nor the entire truth. "Oh, usually they go 'til around midnight, then it takes a while for everybody to get back to their cars, and then there's traffic, so maybeâ€¦two, three A.M?" Naturally, he left out the parts where we usually hung around until the majority of people had already left, either trying to meet the band or just loitering, unwilling to go back to our comparatively dull households.

Fergus asked us a few more questions, his big, easy grin oddly disarming. I was actually beginning to feel a little more at ease, at least until he brought up my recent injury.

"So, my boy, how's that leg of yours?" he asked nonchalantly, as though it were a perfectly normal, everyday question.

I tensed slightly, almost becoming defensive until a memory came fluttering up from my painkiller-hazed days in the hospital. It wasn't as though I had completely forgotten, but it had just seemed insignificant until that moment. Fergus DunBroch had lost one of his legs in a hunting accident, and looking at him, I couldn't tell which one.

"It's not bad," I shrugged, my tone lacking the usual sarcastic sourness that it usually bore when somebody asked me about it. Jack seemed to notice my seeming calm, because he glanced over at me with slightly raised brows, a small grin curving the edges of his mouth.

"Takes a bit of getting used to, eh? Me, I was back out in the wild not a month later, hunting down the beast what tried to do me in," he

said, eyes blazing proudly as he slapped his leg, eyes widening as he tugged up the hem of his slacks to show me the prosthetic underneath. "Rangy old bear thought being short a leg would slow me down, but I showed him."

"I gotta say, you're kind of a bad-ass," Jack said, clearly impressed, that same gleeful look in his eyes as when we'd spoken to Fishlegs the other day. Mr. DunBroch seemed preen in approval of the sentiment, and might have continued if his wife hadn't strolled into the room.

"Filling these boys' heads with more of your stories, Fergus?" she asked, an eyebrow cocked as she smiled knowingly at her husband.

"They aren't just 'stories!' They're real things that happened!"

Ignoring him, Dr. DunBroch turned to us and informed us that the girls would be down in a minute. No sooner had the words left her mouth than they appeared, bursting into the room at a jog, all smiles and breathy giggling. The first thing I noticed was that they were holding hands, looking for all the world like they'd been the best of friends their whole lives long. The next thing I noticed was that Punz had done something to Merida. She'd taken the girl who I'd only seen in scrubs, riding clothes, and baggy t-shirts and messy hair, and made her into some sort of fierce-looking glamazon warrior.

Her normally untamed red hair was pulled back into a thick braid, with only a few well-placed ringlets framing her face. Her eyes were done in some dark shade that made them stand out, startlingly blue. A sleeveless, black vest hung unbuttoned over a dark blue, ruffly top, and she had on slightly less than skin-tight pants, crisscrossed with numerous superfluous zippers and artfully placed tears. In short, Punz had managed to make her over without transforming her into some sort of sparkle-princess, which she most certainly wasn't. If we hadn't all been gathered there in her living room, I'd have sworn she was dressed to tackle some sort of post-apocalyptic wasteland.

There wasn't a chance for me to sort out how I felt about all of that. Beside me Jack let out this strangled sound, like somebody had kicked him in the throat, and then he fairly shouted, "Punz, what did you do to your head?!"

"Oh, this?" she said innocently, reaching up to her hair, and making me do a double-take as I finally noticed what had made Jack jump to his feet like the couch was on fire. "I told you, I wanted to cut it."

"Butâ€|your hair," he said, voice high and helpless as she ran her fingers through her newly short-cropped brunette locks. I realized I was gaping as well, and shut my mouth, biting my lip as I glanced nervously back over at Merida. For some reason, I was worried that if my eyes lingered too long that her father would grab me by the neck and throw me out the front door.

"Oh, I think you girls look lovely," Dr. DunBroch said, evidently pleased to see her daughter get dressed up, "I should get my cameraâ€|"

"Mum, no!" Merida cried, "Ugh, we're going to be late if we don't leave now! Right?" She cast a pleading look toward Jack and I, and we quickly agreed. Or at least I did. Jack seemed to be in some sort of misty daze, staring at his girlfriend with his mouth slightly agape. You would have thought she'd grown an extra head or two, rather than received a long overdue haircut.

"Be safe!" her mother called as we hurried down the front walk.

"_Hurry!_" Merida hissed, "Bye mum! I won't be too late! _Oh my gosh, let's never come back here_."

"Well you all took your sweet time, didn't you?" Aster said accusingly as we piled back into the van. I sat on the far side, behind his seat, with Merida in the middle and Punz behind Jack. "Oy, Blondie, your hair!" the Aussie squawked when he saw her.

"Do you like it?" she asked sweetly.

"Well, yeah, but blimey. Give a guy fair warning next time."

"Is it really that shocking?" she asked worriedly, "Do you think I should have told my parents first? Maybe it's too short."

"Don't be silly," Merida scoffed, "You look adorable." Punz fairly beamed at the praise.

Aster tore away from the curb, muttering under his breath that we still had one more stop to make before heading into town. His crazy careening had us leaning uncontrollably into one another in the back. My whole right side was left feeling too hot every time Merida inadvertently tilted against me.

"So, ah," I began, attempting to initiate some semblance of conversation. The radio had been switched to something easier on the ears once the girls were in the vehicle, though Aster kept thumbing his iPod and grumbling to himself as though the lack of screeching metal was causing him physical discomfort. "Your dad was less terrifying than I imagined he would be."

"Oh, that's because Punzie here spent the whole day regaling him with tales of how gentlemanly you boys are."

"Did she now?" Jack laughed, watching us in the rearview.

"Well, it's true!" Punz countered, "And I didn't want him worrying that Merida was going to come home all debauched and whatever."

"You don't have to worry about that," Aster said, all steely assurance, "As your chaperone for the evening I can guarantee a night free of male debauchery."

"Fuck, I knew I shouldn't have invited you," Jack said, shaking a rueful fist in the air.

"Watch your mouth, mate! There's ladies present!"

"Like we don't hear plenty of swearing when you're _not_ around," Punz snickered.

"I shudder to think," Aster said, "Your dainty ears must be awash in vulgarities."

"Well, it's not like I have vapors every time somebody uses the 'f' word or something!" she protested.

"Please, babe, you can't even say the 'f' word," Jack teased.

"I can too!" she said, "Fuck! See? Oh, stop laughing! You're all terrible!" She sat back in her seat with a pout, arms crossed over her shimmery top as we made the van shake with mirth.

"Sorry, Punz," I told her, "It's like hearing a kitten swear." My words sent Jack off into peals of laughter, until Punz reached forward and tugged on his ear.

"Ow! Okay, I'm sorry!" he snorted, biting his lip and leaning forward, clutching his stomach in an effort to quell his laughter.

Soon enough, we found ourselves in a neighborhood that was admittedly less upscale than the one Merida called home. The buildings were stacked closely together, some of them businesses on the ground floor, with apartments piled haphazardly on top. It was an area I was more familiar with, having spent many a night roaming the streets here with friends, or hanging around at the Thorston's. Their parents had been the most lax about guests and parties, aside from my father, and I disdained having friends over, so theirs was the house we all most often gathered at.

Ruffnut Thorston had been Astrid's best friend back in those days, and they were more likely than not still close. I had a fleeting thought that Ruffnut might not be pleased with the way things had gone awry with Astrid and I, the way I'd shunned her at the hospital. There wasn't much I could do about it now, but I couldn't help but feel a small twitch of apprehension as we turned onto their street.

The van stopped outside a rare single family home, and Aster leaned on the horn as Jack pulled out his phone to inform those within that we were waiting outside. "We know these guys from high school," I informed Merida, "They're, ah, a little insane."

"Only a little?" she asked, her mouth curved into a smirk.

"Okay, they're a lot insane."

"They aren't that bad," Punz disputed, "Hiccup blows things out of proportion a lot, Merida, don't listen to him."

"Oh yeah? You know the Mentos and Diet Pepsi thing? Well, one time Tuffnut put a Mentos in a glass bottle, and stopped up the top. Then he flipped a picnic table over and hid on the other side, and the bottle exploded, and when he looked up there were pieces of glass embedded in the table. You know how much force that would have taken? He could have killed himself," I regaled.

"Oh, please. Is any of that even true?" Punz said disbelievingly.

"Oh, it's true," Jack swore, "I was there. It was _awesome_. We also used to backyard wrestle. One time he smashed a bottle over my head, and lemme tell ya, that shit fucking _hurts_. But then I punched him in the heart, and he fell on the ground and cried for ten minutes."

"Okay, Jack, thank you," Punz said with a sigh, "I'm sorry, Merida. I hope this isn't totally traumatizing for you."

"Not at all," Merida said, blue eyes bright as she fought a grin, "Consider me highly entertained."

"Don't encourage them," Aster said, aggrieved by the goings on in his van, "You're like to start a knife-fight."

"I don't even have my knife," Jack said, "And furthermore—oh, holy shit."

"What?" Punz and I asked in unison.

"Oh my God. Oh, shit, Hiccup, it's _him_." Before I could ask who he was talking about, he jabbed a finger against the tinted glass window, pointing toward the Thorston's house.

"Oh, no," I groaned.

"Oh, hell _yes_. Oh my god. Yes. This is going to be fantastic," Jack gushed, practically bouncing in his seat.

"What? Who is it? Ruff's fiancée?" Punz asked, frowning out the window as I sank into my seat.

"_It's the dragon guy_," Jack hissed, biting his lip as we watched the twins approach the van. Tuff was shouting something back toward the house, and Ruff was brushing one of her braids back over her shoulder, hand in hand with the very last person I had been expecting to see.

"Hi guys," she said as she pulled open the door.

"Fishlegs!" Jack shouted as the hulking form of the dragon enthusiast filled the open doorway, looking taken aback at finding two familiar faces within. "How's it going, buddy?"

"Hiccup? Jack? I-I didn't realize it was you two Ruff was talking about," the man in question said as his fiancée impatiently squeezed past him, climbing up to sit beside Punz.

"You guys know each other?" Ruff asked, scowling over at me with a touch of disdain.

"Sort of," I said at the same time that Jack said, "Hell yeah!"

"We met the other day," Fishlegs said as Tuff scrambled up to join his sister.

"Hey, I don't think there's enough room in this row for all of us," Punz said as she squeezed up as close as possible to Merida, who was already pressed flush against my side in the most disconcerting

way.

"So _move_," Ruff told her.

"I'm not sitting in the back," Tuff said.

"_Somebody_ has to sit in the back," Aster said.

"Dude, there's eight tons of crap back there, why didn't you clean the van out?" Jack sneered.

"Well, I didn't realize that everybody and their brother was going to be coming along with us, that's why!"

"I told you who was coming! Hell, I sent you pictures of everybody for the I.D.s, you stupidâ€", "

Before an all-out argument could begin, Punz threw off her seatbelt and crawled forward between the two front seats, "Oh gosh, the both of you, stop it!" she chided, "I'll sit with Jack, and then Fishlegs can sit in the back, and you four can sit in the middle!" Her tone carried a finality that nobody could object to.

"Jeez, fine _mom_," Ruff sniggered.

"Punz getting bossy, I like it," Tuff agreed.

"Hey, bro, that's my girl," Jack said with mock outrage as Punz settled in his lap. Not the safest way to drive, but we'd traveled under more hazardous conditions in the past, including having five people sardined in the back seat of Astrid's tiny Geo, with Tuffnut laid across their laps as a sixth. _God, we're stupid_, I thought once everyone was settled, and Merida was no longer crushed against my side.

"We haven't scared you off yet, have we?" I asked her as Aster put the pedal to the metal, claiming that we were going to be late, while Jack argued that these shows never started on time anyway.

"Haven't I told you before that I've seen worse?" she said with an amused tilt to her brow.

"So, how do you guys know each other?" Ruff interjected suddenly, twisted in her seat so as to include Fishlegs in the conversation.

"We met online," he said simply, and I winced.

"Oh?" she asked, looking wickedly humored.

"Yeah, they share a love of extinct animals," Jack said from the front seat. How he could hear us over the speakers I'll never know, but it took every ounce of self-restraint I possessed not to hit him.

"Oh, the _dragons_ you mean," Ruff said with this glazed look of resigned familiarity on her face.

"How did _you_ two end up together?" I asked, hoping to derail her interest in me.

"We met at school," Ruff began to explain.

"Yeah. I was tutoring her in environmental studies," Fishlegs added.

"Oh, you guys are in agriculture?" Merida asked, turning toward them as her interest was clearly piqued.

"Yeah. I'm majoring in animal sciences at the Bio Studies building," Fishlegs said, "Ruff just has a passing interest."

"The class sounded easy and I wanted some easy credits, you mean," she corrected with a snicker.

"I'm taking animal sciences too! I mean, not yet, but I start this semester," Merida said.

"Oh, what's your focus?" Fishlegs asked.

"Not sure yet, but possibly large animal medicine," she said. "Maybe even zoology." Their banter continued as Fishlegs began filling her in on what certain professors were like, and the workload she could expect for her classes. Ruff seemed unconcerned by her fiancé's prattle with another woman, but I began to feel unsettled. This was supposed to be a date, sort of, and I had barely been able to speak to Merida thus far. And now her attention was fully occupied, her expression rapt as Fishlegs told her about working in the greenhouse, and assisting in the on-campus animal clinic.

My attention wandered as anxiety began to set in. What if we didn't get a single moment alone? What if I had nothing half as interesting to say to her as Fishlegs? Up front, Jack had his arms around Punz, and she was leaning her head on his shoulder. They looked so perfect; it made something twist in my chest. Maybe it was jealousy, but not the angry, venomous sort. More like the wistful kind, the "why not me?"

We reached a parking garage three blocks away from the House of Blues, and Aster made a deep, strangled noise when he saw the line queued back almost to the entrance of the garage three blocks away. "I told you we should have left earlier," he grumbled. The van nearly scraped the roof of the garage as parking attendants directed us to an open space. Just as we began to pile out, he shouted for us to wait. "Hold on, hold on you lot," he said, reaching over and digging through his glove box. "Alright, I.D.s all around, who hasn't got one?"

"Is this really necessary?" Punz sighed as he handed one to her, frowning when she saw her name, "Janice? Really? Do I look like a Janice to you?"

"Janice was me mum's name," Aster objected, "It's a perfectly acceptable name. And besides, if you get caught, you don't want them knowing your real name. Right Giuseppe?"

"Right," Jack agreed. "And if you wanna get up to the lounge you need to be over twenty-one."

"Yeah, no peer pressure now," Aster said, "If you don't wanna drink,

just don't. Here Hiccup."

"Alonzo?" I said incredulously, "What the fuck, Jack."

"Allonsy, Alonzo! That's what."

"Was that a Doctor Who reference?" Merida giggled.

"She watches Who, Hiccup. She's a keeper," Jack proclaimed.

Once we were all piled out of the van and headed toward the line, Aster pointed out once again with a mixture of triumph and aggravation that he'd been right about us all taking so long. "And look at these kids. Fucking hipsters as far as the eye can see. What sort of douche-fest did you drag me to, Frost?" he asked, crossing his arms over his Alice in Chains t-shirt with a look of utter abhorrence on his face.

"What kind of show did you think it was gonna be?" Jack scoffed, "I told you Flynn's band is indie punk."

"Bloody hipsters and emos and scene kids galore," Aster muttered, "Alright, well, whatever, as long as none of them touch me."

"Wow, you really just don't like anybody, do ya Aster?" I asked.

"I like everybody. I just don't understand the appeal of dressing like an utter drongo," he replied, looking almost pitying as he surveyed the sea of concert-goers before us. "Poor tykes. Doomed to reflect on their youth through a veil of plaid scarves and non-prescription glasses."

I sensed somebody sidling up beside me, and looked round to find that it was Merida. "So," she said, "You've been here before, yes?"

"Once or twice," I shrugged, "Artists like to perform here because they think playing a smaller venue makes them seem more accessible."

"Damn right," Aster agreed, "Lot of phony show boaters." By now his comments had drawn one or two dirty looks, but he ignored them readily enough.

"You've never seen this band, though?" Merida asked.

"Nah, never even heard of them," I admitted.

"Why go to a show for a band you've never heard of?"

"Well, Jack decided I needed to get out of the house and stop moping about my leg."

"And you agree."

"For the most part. I mean, I also, ah, well, you wanted me to call you, soâ€¦," I trailed off less than gracefully, and she offered me a crooked smile. The line began to move forward as they finally pulled open the doors, and to my complete shock I felt her hand hook through my arm as we followed along. Jack noticed, of courseâ€”he always notices things at the worst momentsâ€”and gave me a knowing wink

before Punz tugged him forward by his hand.

It took a half an hour for us to file up to the front doors, where the House staff had us hold up our arms so they could wave their security wands around our bodies. "You guys don't have any cameras do you?" one of them asked suspiciously.

"No way," Jack said with a smirk, "I mean, it's not like cell phones these days all have a built in camera or anything." The bouncer gave him a dour look before sighing and ushering him inside. Asking Jack if he has a camera somewhere on his person is sort of like asking a porcupine if it has quills, but there was no way for these poor slobs to know that.

"Thank God," Rapunzel said once we were through the doors, "I've had to go to the bathroom since like five seconds after you guys picked us up." She waited for a moment, staring expectantly at Ruffnut and Merida, batting her eyelashes as she waited for them to catch on.

Ruff heaved a sigh after a second and grabbed Merida's hand. "Okay, let's all go to the bathroom together, because we're girls and that's how we roll," she said, "Everybody hold hands so we don't get separated! If we're not back in six hours send a search party you guys!"

"Why do girls all go to the bathroom together?" Fishlegs asked once they had disappeared into the crowd, face screwed up as he tried to determine a likely cause for this mysterious behavior.

"So we can't possibly hear them talking shit about us," Aster explained drolly, "Us menfolk are too delicate to handle the enigma that is the ladies' room, what with their tampon dispensing machines and clean facilities, so they know they're safe within."

"Oh," said the dragon expert as if some great secret had been revealed to him.

"He's kidding," Jack said, slapping Aster on the arm and leading us into the fray that was the crowded show floor, "They all go together so that if one of them falls into the toilet the others can save her."

Pre-show music blared over the speakers, effectively drowning out all forms of conversation aside from vociferous shouting. It was all hype music, meant to get the crowd pumped up before the show, and consisted mainly of dance beats and over the top rap songs. "This is my jam!" Jack screamed as Kesha began to play, and even I couldn't tell if he was serious or not.

The floor became more crowded with each passing second, and I began to feel antsy as we waited for the girls to come back. Did there really have to be so many people here? Was it always so crowded at shows like this? Every way I turned there was somebody lingering in my way, closing me in. My leg began to throb, my phantom foot itching as I searched over the tops of people's heads for the flash of red that would herald Merida's return.

"Hey Hiccup," Tuff said almost right in my ear.

I spun around to face him, scowling at his unnecessary proximity. Tuff has a thing for baiting people, especially me, so I pushed away the urge to step back from him. "What?" I asked.

"I got a job at Smith's," he said, laughing as my expression turned to one of incredulity. Smith's was the hardware store where I was meant to return to work sometime this coming week. I had already called my boss and told him I'd be coming back as soon as I got the all-clear from my doctors.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked, knowing Tuff wouldn't take offense, "They replaced me with you?"

"I know, right? I put on my application that I know you and they were like, 'Yeah, let's hire this guy, he's gotta be good if he knows Hiccup.' Idiots," he snickered.

"Well, at least I know my credibility will still be intact with you there in my place," I said sarcastically, which only made him laugh all the harder. My friends are the worst people, I swear.

Several more minutes dragged on, music throbbing in my ears, the roar of people trying to talk to one another drowning out anything even resembling thought. All I could do was lean against a nearby railing, keeping pressure off my leg as I tried to ignore how many people they were able to squeeze into this one building. A hand touched my arm, and I jumped, my leg protesting the sudden movement as I realized it was just Merida.

"Where's Punz?" Jack asked, frowning as he watched Ruff throw an arm around her fianc . I had to wonder again what had led a girl like her to settle down with anybody, much less a guy like Fishlegs. Not that he's undeserving, or her for that matter, it just seemed incongruous. Maybe I'd been out of the loop for a lot longer than I thought, longer than my injury could excuse.

"She was talking to that Finn guy," Ruff said.

"Flynn you mean?" he asked, the downturn of his mouth deepening to the extreme. As if speaking his name had summoned him forth, the fabled Flynn suddenly emerged from the crowd amid cheers from those who knew who he was. Punz was holding his hand, having guided him there through the throngs.

"Jack!" she crowed, releasing the other man and rushing over to her boyfriend, "Guess what? Flynn asked me to do a song with him!"

"That's great," Jack said, twisting his frown into an expression more suitable for the moment, though he gave the oblivious Flynn a dark look as the musician introduced himself to our group.

Jack was right  this dude was handsome. Like, ridiculously good-looking. No wonder he looked so annoyed every time the guy came up in conversation, what with the way he smiled disarmingly and charmed even Aster into laughing at a joke I couldn't hear over the ambient mob.

"Man, it's crowded down here. Hey, you guys wanna come up to the lounge?" Flynn asked once introductions were done.

The knowledge that the lounge would be less jammed with people basically made the decision for me. I pushed away from the railing, "Uh, you wanna go?" I asked Merida, almost as an afterthought, but she was already holding my arm.

"There's too many people!" she shouted, "Let's get the hell out of this crowd!"

A line led upstairs, but Flynn led us past them all. While we'd been waiting in line outside, staffers had come along and asked for I.D.s, handing out wristbands to mark those who were over twenty-one so they wouldn't be needlessly hassled later on. "These guys are with me," our escort told the rather large man guarding the lounge doors as we approached. He squinted at us, then waved us through, much to the outrage of those stuck waiting in line.

Inside, it was blessedly spacious. The lounge ran the length of the building, and was open to the rest of the club. People leaned on railings, watching the crowd below as they sipped expensive looking drinks. "Oh yeah, this is where I was born to be," Tuff said, leaning precariously forward over the metal bars that kept him from plummeting to the floor, "Eat it, peasants! I am your overlord! Ow!" He yelped and rubbed his arm where his sister had hit him, and shoved her away.

"Stop being a jackass," she snarled.

"Stop being ugly," he shot back. Well, it was good to see that they still boasted the same caring brother/ sister relationship that they'd always been so well known for. I felt a prickling sensation of embarrassment roiling across my face, but to my great relief Merida continued to seem amused by the continued antics of my friends.

"I'm sorry you have to be subjected to this," I told her.

"Don't worry about it," she said, "I like your friends. They're a lotâ€|well, they're not as stuffy and stuck-up as the people I used to hang around back in Glasgow."

"How do you mean?" I asked. She slid down into a chair by the railings, and I took the one opposite, grateful for the chance to get off of my leg. Climbing two sets of stairs had done murder to what was left of my appendageâ€|I was going to regret it in the morning, but for now I simply paid it no mind.

"Well, I don't know if you noticed but my family is sort of well-off," she understated. "Back home, I went to a private school. Very classy and upscale, and very boring. The teachers were boring, and my classmates were boringâ€|and fake. Everybody was very proper, and shallow, and incredibly concerned with their reputation. And when I was around them I was expected to act the same as them, talk like them, dress like them, and so on."

"That sounds awful," I said, feeling for the first time like I'd gotten off lucky by going to public school.

"It was," she sighed, "Any sign of rebellion was met with swift punishment. I used to sit in class and think 'what would they do if I began screaming and tore my shirt off?'"

"Did you ever?"

"No. I had other ways of separating myself. I was the only girl in archery, for one."

"Right. The Olympic class archerâ€"that must have been interesting, at least."

"Pfft. Interesting in the sense that everybody was hyper competitive and self-absorbed, yes. If you think your American sportsmen are full of themselves, then you've never seen an Olympic athlete at their best."

"To be honest, I know absolutely nothing about any athletes of any kind," I admitted.

"_No_," she said, feigning shock, "_You_, you shining example of male bravado and ultimate Frisbee prowess?"

"Shut up."

"Iâ€"oh, I think it's starting," she said, breaking off and turning to watch the stage as the music abruptly stopped, and the lights dimmed. I wanted to tell her I didn't care about the showâ€"I'd have much preferred if we spent the whole night pretending the rest of the world didn't exist.

I hadn't noticed Flynn leaving, but he must have because he appeared on stage a moment later, strutting over to the mic stand to thunderous cheering. The rest of his band followed, but I had no interest in anything he said. Jack appeared, leaning over the table and glowering. "Where's Punz?" I asked over the roaring fans below.

"She went backstage with _him_," he sneered, indicating the man revving up the crowd from his perch onstage.

"You okay?" I asked. If I hadn't known any better, I could have sworn that the seething emotion in my best friend's eyes was jealousy.

"Yeah, super," he said. As if coming to his senses, he looked back and forth between Merida and I. She was staring down as the band began to play, and I was trying too hard not to stare at her. Jack's scowl deepened, and he pushed away from the table, going to stand by the bar. _Oh, great_, I thought as I watched him shouting something to the bartender. Never in my life had I seen Jack jealousâ€"then again, I had also never seen him in a serious relationship.

I wanted to go over to him, to reassure him that Punz would never choose some pretty-boy musician over him, but I didn't get the chance. Fishlegs suddenly loomed before me, and guess what he wanted to talk to me about?

"So get this, there's this dragon exhibit at the Museum of Science," he told me, and then there was hardly a break in his stream of words for the next fifteen minutes, during which I watched Jack down two shots, and walk away from the bar with a beer in hand. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Merida watching the band with rapt

attention. If I had been paying attention I would have had to admit that they weren't half-bad, but they were the least of my concerns at the moment.

Fishlegs wouldn't stop talking about dragons, and I didn't want to listen to him. As if it wasn't bad enough that I'd told my psychiatrist that I'd seen a dragon—he probably was writing out my certificate for insanity at that very moment. I could only imagine what he'd have to say at my next appointment, which was another reason why I'd agreed to come tonight. I did need a moment of normalcy, no matter how brief, because if I didn't escape from the reality I was building for myself then I really was going to go insane.

Dragons. Jesus Christ. What was I thinking?

I stood up rather abruptly, sending Fishlegs hopping back. "I'm sorry," I said, "I—need some air."

There was an elevator, I noted as I headed toward the stairs, but I didn't feel like waiting for it. It was faster to hobble my way down the staircase, wincing every step of the way. By the time I made the ground floor, I was ready to collapse, but I pushed toward the still-open doors. Outside there were small pockets of people gathered, most of them smoking. I realized what was happening as I felt a surge of desperation upon finding that I wasn't even alone out here.

No, no, not again, I thought, pressing a hand over my mouth to keep out the cigarette fumes. If I had a panic attack here, then that would just cement the fact in my mind that I was losing it. The crowds, I thought, there's too many people. And it's too noisy. And Fishlegs won't shut up, and I saw a fucking dragon, I shouldn't have told anybody, I should have just forgotten all about it, but I had to go open my big mouth, and now they're all gonna think I'm crazy, oh God, I'm crazy, I'm—

"Hey, Hiccup," I spun around and saw the last person who I would have thought would follow me.

"Ruff?" I asked, forcing away the feeling of dizzy panic. Deep breaths, I thought, relax. Don't freak out in front of her, you'll never hear the end of it. With monumental effort, I faced her, and said as casually as I could manage, "What's up?"

"Are you okay?" she asked, pursing her lips crookedly, arms folded across her chest.

"Oh yeah, fine," I said, my tone inches away from hysteria, "Just stuffy in there, is all."

"Alright," she said, as though she didn't believe me, "Anyway, I just wanted to talk to you for a minute."

"About what?" Stop sweating, it's too cool out here to sweat. Calm the fuck down.

"Astrid's pretty upset. You know, about your whole leg thing, but she won't talk about it. I know you said something dickish to her, and I get that you're all traumatized and whatever, but I really think you

should apologize. She's really messed up about it." Not this. I didn't need this. Hadn't I already talked about this with Jack? I was trying. Didn't she know I was trying?

"I'm sorry."

"Don't say it to me. Say it to her," she said with finality, brushing one of her braids back as she turned on her heel and stalked back into the club. I sagged, bending forward, sucking in air. Why wasn't there enough air out here? All of these fucking smokers were burning up their air with their disgusting cigarettes. I wanted to scream at them, but there wasn't enough air for me to pull into my lungs to do so.

"You alright buddy?" somebody asked, laughing. They probably thought I was on something, drugged out and about to puke.

I had to get away from this place. I straightened, and began to walk. I had barely gotten halfway down the block before I heard running behind me. "Hiccup?" No. It was Merida. I didn't want her to see me like this.

I spun around, watching her race up. "I'm fine," I barked before she could ask me.

"Oh, yeah, you look just swell," she scoffed. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Iâ€"it was tooâ€"there's justâ€", I couldn't figure out what I wanted to say. The cool night suddenly felt too hot, hot and dry, hot like the sun bearing down on me, my leg aching like there was a boulder on top of it, the crowd roaring inside, growling, big and black, everything hurt, oh God, why did everything have to hurt_â€"

"Hiccup, look at me." My hands were over my face, I realized, and I was backed against the side of the vibrating building.

"It's too much," I said, "I can'tâ€"I can't breathe."

"If you can talk, you can breathe," I heard her say, "Now, look at me." I lowered trembling hands. I was hunched over, shaking, my whole body flooded with quaking anxiety.

"You're alright," she said, eyes filled with a certainty I wished I could have. "Deep breaths now. That's it. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"Iâ€|I justâ€|I don't think I can do this."

"Do what?"

"I can't be normal anymore," I said, "I'm trying, but I can't do it."

"Of course you can."

"I think I'm going crazy."

"You're not."

"Well, how do you know?!" I shouted, but she didn't even flinch. "You don't know anything," I muttered, sinking down to the ground, closing my eyes.

"I know that you don't feel whole anymore. I know you feel useless, and less than human."

"How do you know?" I asked again, quieter.

"Because of my dad." Oh, right. That.

"So what," I said, heart still pounding, looking for some way to vent away my terror, "Is this some sort of thing for you? Guys with one leg?" I knew I sounded like an asshole, but I couldn't stop myself. The words came tearing out, and I didn't even have the wherewithal to regret them.

"Don't be stupid," she said, sounding far more understanding than I would have. If I were her I would have punched me right in the face. "I like you because you're smart, and sarcastic, and you're a real person. Not some walking, talking snob with a stick up his ass."

"No, the stick's on my leg," I muttered, and her laughter made some small knot of tension in the middle of my chest loosen ever so slightly.

She sat down beside me, and put a hand over mine. "You'll be okay, you know," she said gently.

"I know."

X

TWENTY ONE PAGES AND I STILL DIDN'T FIT IN EVERYTHING I WANTED TO.

sigh

Have you guys ever been to the House of Blues? Charlatans and liars, the lot of them. They have signs hung up everywhere stating that the artist has requested no photography, but I went to the one in Boston to see Lilly Allen once and she was like, "Yeah, I never said that, take all the pictures you want. I don't give a fuck." She also smoked through the whole show.

I hope there's no mistakes in this chapter, because I've been staring at it for 23948203948 hours and I have to stop.

11. Chapter 11

The first part of this chapter is gonna set us up for some major feels later on. The second half is mostly fluff.

Also, this chapter took me a really long time to write, and I'm sorry about that, and that this might not be my best stuff, but I was sick again, and I had some other personal garbage to deal with, and I really didn't feel like writing, but sometimes you gotta slog

through the shit and get it done.

****Thank you guys so much for reading, and I'm sorry if I missed replying to anybody, but I seriously love you all. xoxo****

(I'm also working on another rotbtd fic but idk if I should post it yet or not. It's about magic.)

x

We didn't go back inside right away. The doors were open the whole time, and over the roar of the crowd we could hear the music playing, drifting down the street in waves. For the most part the words were indistinct, but that didn't seem to matter. If I closed my eyes I could feel it, and the vibrating tones had a calming effect on my harried state of mind.

That and Merida's hand. Her palm was warm, where I worried that mine was sweaty. I had to fight the urge to pull away and wipe my hand on my pants. If I grossed her out as much as I thought I did she wouldn't have been holding my hand in the first place. Right?

I couldn't help but overanalyze the situation. Oddly enough, it helped to distract me from the subsiding panic that had dug its proverbial claws into my chest only a short time before. Was she holding my hand because she felt bad for me and thought it would help me calm down? No, she'd been holding onto my arm before, but maybe that had been so we wouldn't get separated. After all, she was here with a group of relative strangers, and I was the only person she really knew.

We were mostly silent, but thankfully the lack of words didn't segue into uncomfortable silence. We watched people walk by, kids taking a break from the show, smoking or talking on their phones, arguing, laughing. Somebody stopped and asked if they could bum a smoke, but Merida politely told him we had none to spare. If I had answered I would have told him I don't smoke, and sent him along with a dirty look. Maybe there's really no need for me to be such an acerbic little smartass all the time. Why did I always become so defensive at the drop of a hat? Jack would have a good answer for that, but was still inside.

As soon as I thought of him I remembered how he was acting right before I fled. I hoped he wasn't getting into trouble, and the very thought of what he might be getting up to spurred me to my feet. "What's wrong?" Merida asked, helping me up when I find that my leg is unsteady and sore.

"Nothing," I lied, "Well, Jack seemed upset earlier, andâ€¦"

"You just had a panic attack and you're worried about your friend?" she asked, shaking her head and smiling.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Absolutely nothing. Let's go find him," she said.

Flynn's set was almost over by the time we pushed back inside, holding up our wristbands to show we'd already been through the ticket line before. This time we took the elevator up to the lounge,

but without Flynn there they wouldn't let us in. Jack didn't answer his phone when I called, but Tuff did.

"Hey man, where are you?" he drawled, clearly not entirely sober.

"I'm outside the lounge," I said, "Is Jack with you?"

"What? Nah. I dunnoâ€|HEY JACK!" I jerked my phone away from my ear, and I swear I could hear him through the door and over the speakers, "Yeah, I dunno where he went."

"Thanks Tuff," I said dryly. "Is Aster there?"

"Oh, yeah, we were just arm wrestling with Legs. Hold on."

"What do you want?" Aster asked once the phone had been passed to him.

"Do you know where Jack is?"

"No, I thought he was with you." I bit down the urge to snap at him accusatoriallyâ€"he was the one who was supposed to be watching us, but then again, he's not a babysitter. "Maybe he went to find Punz," he said. "Call me if you can't find him, alright? Don't want the little bugger getting into trouble."

Apprehension came wriggling up from my stomach, my already taught nerves flexing under the weight of this new problem. "I'm sure he's fine," Merida assured me, though she bit her lip when she said it, as though she was picking up on my mounting tension.

"Yeah," I said, trying to remain positive. After all, it had been a while since Jack had gotten into the sort of trouble I was picturing him stirring up in my head. In high school, he was worse. Back then, it had been my job to make sure he didn't drink too much, to stop him from getting into fights. As upbeat and fun-loving as he is normally, that's how dark he can be when he works himself up to it. Alcohol doesn't help, but for the past year or so he'd been ditching old habits, much to my relief.

Nobody else ever seemed as worried about it as I was, but then again, they never saw him at his worst. He has just enough of that lingering sense of self-preservation to hold it all in until he knows he's alone. Up until that moment it's easy for everybody, myself included, to forget what a shitty life he's had.

Jack could very well have just been off having fun, but something in my gut told me he wasn't. Something wasn't right, something in his eyes had told me it wasn't, and I'd gone off to freak out over my own issues. Even if I couldn't help it, it made me feel like a horrible friend.

We emerged back down on the ground floor just in time for Flynn to introduce Rapunzel for his last song. "I'd like you all to meet a very special friend of mine," he said to much hooting and cat-calling. Punz came prancing out on stage like a jubilant fawn, beaming and twirling and taking a bow. Finding Jack if he was in the crowd was going to be next to impossible.

Punz began to sing, another song I didn't recognize or have the time to appreciate. My phone buzzed in my hand, and I saw I had a text from Aster. **Jack is outside**. I needed no further motivation.

He was propped against the building on the far side, well away from where I had wound up. There was a beer in his hand, and he was talking animatedly to a group of people he probably had just met. It was so typical of him to make friends with strangers, that I felt almost silly for worrying. But he had that beer, obviously snuck out from the bar, and I could tell he was pretty far gone from the bouncy quality of his words. To the untrained ear he didn't sound as drunk as he was, but I'd known this guy for the better half of my life. He couldn't fool me.

"Hiccup!" he shouted when he saw me, "This guy, this is _the_ guy. Hiccup, show 'em your leg, man!"

"Not right now," I said, far more easily than I'd have given myself credit for. But this whole situation had the old air of familiarity to it. This was something I _knew_ how to deal with, whether that was a good thing or not.

"Aw, party pooper. Hey, you hear Punz sing? Doesn't she sing like a boss?" he asked, leaning heavily on my shoulder, weighing down my bad leg.

"She sure does, buddy," I said without wincing.

"Man, that Flynn guy. He's great, huh? He let her sing with him. Got her to cut her hair, too. What a dick, haha!" He laughed, but there was a dark undertone to his entire bearing.

"Hey, you wanna go for a walk, Jack?" I asked, "We could go get some coffee."

"Coffee? Pssh. Nah, I'm good. 'Sides, I made all these new friends," he said, waving toward the general vicinity of the people he'd been entertaining. I could see them laughing, hands over their mouths as they made gestures at Jack, twirling their fingers around their ears and miming drinking out of imaginary bottles.

Not good. If I left Jack with them they would say something to him, something offhanded, and he'd take it personally. When he was normal, he could laugh off any joke directed at him, when he wasn't—_Dammit, Jack, what are you doing to yourself?_

I felt helpless, and I tossed a look at Merida. It wasn't fair to drag her into this, and I didn't want her to see what might happen if things got out of hand. Jealous Jack wasn't somebody I'd ever had to deal with. I didn't know what would push him over the edge in this state of mind.

Footsteps came hurrying up behind us, and then I heard Aster calling out to us. "Hey-hey, the Thunder from Down Under!" Jack shouted. Oh, gosh, this was going to turn into a spectacle. The giggling group was watching us with expectant eyes, just waiting for something to happen. Assholes. If it weren't for Jack I would have told them to get lost, but the best I could manage was to shoot them dirty looks when he wasn't looking.

"Oi, Jack, you causing trouble, mate?" Aster asked with a big grin, tone unusually jovial.

"'Course not," Jack scoffed.

"Well why not? That's what we came here for, right? Let's go back inside, they've started a mosh pit, y'know."

Much to my relief, Jack seemed to consider this. "Yeah," he said after a moment, "Yeah, let's do that. Bye guys!" He waved to the now disappointed gathering, and we began to lead him away.

"Was that close?" Merida whispered as Aster and Jack pulled ahead, waxing on about how hard they were about to bring it to the mosh pit.

"Not as close as it could have been," I said. With Jack, you can't really tell how narrow an escape you've made sometimes. For the first time I could remember, I was grateful for Aster. Maybe he wasn't as bad an influence as I had thought, and I couldn't help but be reminded of the fact that the last few times Jack went out partying it was Aster who went with him and not me. Guilt came bubbling back up when I remembered feeling just the tiniest bit of relief at the prospect of not having to interact with people, of not having to be the one to keep my friends in line for once.

God, I'm a bad person, I thought.

We almost made it back inside without incident. The doors were maybe ten feet away when Jack glanced across the street and froze, expression puzzled at first, and then outraged. Before anyone could ask him what was wrong, he was gone, and I saw the reason why a moment later.

There was a guy across the street, his hand firmly clutched around the arm of a girl who was trying desperately to lean away from him. She looked distraught, afraid, and I could see her mouthing the word "no" even from where we were. Even if he hadn't been drunk, Jack would have taken issue with this, but now it was a bit more serious if the way he was charging across the street was any indication.

Aster was almost hot on his heels, but Jack was too fast for him. He reached the pair about twenty seconds before the rest of us. "Hey!" he shouted, then he was grabbing the guy and wrenching him away. "The fuck is wrong with you, man?"

"The fuck is wrong with _you_?!" the target of his wrath shot back, eyes rounding owlshly with alarm.

"Really? You're gonna look at that girl and ask me what _my_ problem is?" He was right up in the guy's face, shoulders squared back, fists clenched and quaking at his sides.

"Jack," Aster said, half a step ahead of me. I didn't realize it until I had already reached them, but I had run across the street. A bad idea in retrospect, but at the moment I couldn't feel anything but mounting trepidation.

Without even looking at him, Jack shrugged away from the Aussie's

tentative grip. "You piece of shit," Jack snarled, "You don't fucking put your hands on a girl like that!"

"How about it's none of your goddamn business?" the other guy half-shouted back, looking increasingly worried, but not as worried as he should have been given the look of wild rage in Jack's eyes.

"Jack," I said, sidling up into the swing zone, knowing he couldn't possibly try to hit this guy without also hitting me. It wasn't a guarantee that he wouldn't still try, but it was a chance.

"You got my back, Hic," he said, tone dangerously low, "See? We're gonna kick your ass, motherfucker."

"There will be no kicking of asses," Aster said sternly.

"Jack, look around," I said, "There's too many people here. If you jump this guy then the cops are gonna show up. Do you wanna wind up in jail tonight?"

"I sure as shit don't," Aster said.

Resolutely, I placed a hand on my friend's shoulder, and he jerked, as if I'd slapped him. His expression seemed to clear, and he looked down at my hand, then up at me. "No," he admitted, "Guess not."

"Fucking psycho," Jack's would-be victim muttered as I turned him away, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Listen up, mate," I heard Aster snarl over my shoulder, "You just got off lucky. I catch you even looking at another girl sideways tonight and I'll smash your teeth for you on the curb."

"I could have taken that guy," Jack mumbled as we ambled slowly back across the street. My leg was catching up with me now, after all the abuse I'd levied against it in the past few hours, and it was responding accordingly.

"I know you could have," I agreed, "But that doesn't mean it was a good idea."

Jack sighed, "I justâ€¦I don't like that Flynn guy."

"I know."

"He's trying to steal my girlfriend."

"I'm sure he's not."

"You think so?"

"If he does, we can confront him about it and get our asses kicked by him together." That made him laugh, and I felt like I was doing my job for the first time in a long time.

Merida had taken the distraught girl back over to the doors, and they were laughing together about something when we approached. "â€¦just so dumb," the girl was saying, her make-up trailing down her face in

evidence of her encounter.

"Aren't they all?" Merida agreed.

When they spotted us, the formerly imperiled girl beamed gratefully. "Thanks for getting rid of him," she said to Jack, who only smiled weakly in response, "He decided that I owed him for taking me here tonight. Asshole."

"Some guys just can't take a hint, can they," Aster said jovially, slapping Jack on the shoulder, his expression a tight mask.

A cab came for the girl—"Maria"—and we stayed with her until it pulled away from the curb. "You wanna go back in?" I asked Jack. By now, Flynn's band was offstage, and the hype music had been turned back on as the stage was redressed. The lull between acts had sent most of the crowd spilling into the streets, so it wasn't really any less crowded outside anymore.

"No," he said, "No. Let's get some coffee. If that's alright with you guys." Nobody objected. There was a café just down the block. It was already ten-thirty, and a crescent moon hung in the sky, the light it provided barely viable under the persistent electric glow of the city. We were all a little downcast as we gathered around a small sidewalk table, but I noted with a distinct feeling of cautious optimism that Merida was holding my hand again.

X

Wednesday. Wednesday is the worst. Even the worst Monday can't compare to Wednesday. And this Wednesday was particularly bad, because not only did I have therapy in the morning, but this was the Wednesday when I was due to return to work.

I wasn't nervous, not per se. In fact, I'd already gone in on Monday to go over safety procedures for employees with "disabilities." They'd had me fill out paperwork, stuff for OSHA and documents that said they weren't liable for further complications, and I fully understood all the nonsense they'd gone over with me. By the time it was over I was beginning to regret the whole thing.

Now it was too late. Or so I kept telling myself. If I backed out now that would just make me a quitter, and I'd already determined that failure would only compound my misery. With my dad seeming determined to meddle in my life as much as possible, I knew that if I showed any signs of weakness that he was like to yank the reins out of my hands entirely. "If you don't feel up to this, you can always take a step back," he'd said before I left on Monday. I had responded snidely, of course, though I'd felt badly about it afterward.

When I walked into Dr. Sanderson's office on Wednesday morning, I was determined not to talk about the whole "dragon incident." My life was supposed to be getting back to normal, and I'd decided after Saturday that that was what I wanted. No more stupid imaginary dragons, or whining about my leg, or panic attacks. I was no longer trying; I was doing.

"So, Hiccup," he said, as usual, "How are you feeling."

"Fine," I said, not willing to completely give ground. If I threw

everything into reverse all at once he'd know something was up. "I, ah, went out this weekend."

"Oh? How was that?" I took a deep breath, steeling myself; this really wasn't something that I wanted to do, but I knew if I played it right I could fill most of the hour, and if there was time left I could talk about going back to work tonight, or some other bullshit. Anything to derail the elephant in the room.

I began slowly, glancing surreptitiously at the clock every so often. The minutes ticked steadily by, and I didn't hold anything back, no matter how prickly my face became with humiliation. _It's better than the dragon_, I reminded myself over and over. I told him about my father, and Merida's father, and Merida, and Jack, and Ruffnut, and my panic attack, and the incident with the girl, and how we'd stayed out until nearly two A.M.

It was honestly the latest I'd been out in months. Maybe even in the past year, aside from one or two occasions. The concert had ended at midnight, but we hadn't even bothered getting in the van until well-over an hour later. My leg had hurt tremendously by the time I stumbled into my bedroom and fumbled the prosthetic off in the dark. The pain hadn't even been enough to keep me awake, though. No, something else had done the job quite well on its own.

I'd walked Merida to her front door, my leg screaming in protest, but I would have been remiss to let go of her hand. She'd said some things to me, that she'd had fun, and no, my friends really hadn't put her out, and that she thought I was sweet for caring about them the way I did. Even above my myself. Then she'd stood on her toes and kissed me on the cheek. More on the corner of the mouth than anything else.

Of course I'd lain in bed, replaying every second of the night over and over again in my head, wondering what I could have done differently, and deciding in the end that things hadn't worked out all that badly. I hadn't gotten the chance to see her again, but she was a contender now for the person I communicated most, nearly tied with Jack in the number of messages on my phone.

Alright, so maybe some of those parts I left out, but I still managed to take up a good fifty minutes. "Have you had any other panic attacks since?" Dr. Sanderson asked, looking concerned once I finally trailed off.

"Nope," I said.

"No anxiety at all?"

"Not especiallyâ€"well, maybe about tonight."

"You're going back into the working world."

"Yeah. Just for a few hours. And nothing, uh, strenuous."

"Good, good." The clock was ticking. My mind raced, reaching desperately for another relatively safe topic.

"One of my friends got a job there," I blurted. "He's sort of a jerk, but it'll probably be easier having him there to do my dirty

work."

"How so?"

"He's just the type of guy who'll do basically anything. He doesn't give a shit." Tuffnut was always a guinea pig of sorts in our group. He was the one who'd climb an impossibly tall tree to retrieve a lost Frisbee, or let himself get hit in a myriad of places for the sake of a funny video. _Crazy_, yes, but lazy, not at all. He might complain, but that was more for the joy of whining than reluctance to perform the task itself.

"You seem very appreciative of your friends, Hiccup," the good doctor said, though his expression was neutral rather than approving. Sometimes this guy could give my dad a run for his money in the stoicism department.

"I guess," I said.

"But you aren't getting along very well with your father."

"Wellâ€¦not exactly."

"Do you want to talk about that?"

"We're almost out of time," I said perhaps a bit too darkly, because he cracked the faintest smile.

"That bad, huh?"

"No, it'sâ€¦it's just he'sâ€¦I dunno. A lot moreâ€¦overbearing than he used to be. Like suddenly he gives a shit."

"And he didn't before?"

"Not in the way that you'd think. Not like a normal parent. He never worried about me, but it wasn't like he just knew I was one of those kids who didn't fuck up all the time. He almost seemed to _want_ me to go out and get into trouble. And nowâ€¦he looks at me like I'm made of glass." I thought that sounded a bit too poetic, but Dr. Sanderson just nodded and jotted something down on his notepad.

The minute hand ticked into place, hailing the arrival of noontime and the end of our session. I got to my feet almost too quickly.

"Just a moment," the doctor said, "Hiccup, I wanted to address something you said last week." _Oh, great, here it comes_. "You mentioned a dragonâ€¦"

"Look, doc, I was stressed out, okay, and like you said it was probably something elseâ€¦," he held up a hand to forestall me and I fell silent, halfway between the sofa and the door.

"Hiccup, sometimes after a severe trauma the mind creates something, something comforting, or distracting. Sometimes the thing that's created is a false memory, or an imagined person or thing. Sometimes it blocks out the incident entirely. These are all defense mechanisms, to protect the rest of the mind from the perceived threat."

"Yeah, I know all that," I said, peeved, inching slowly toward the door.

"The dragon might have seemed real, to the point where you thought you could feel, or even smell it. You were in a great deal of pain, and terrified."

"So I imagined it," I agreed.

"Essentially. Sometimes in moments of stress we revisit these memoriesâ€"you haven't seen the dragon since then, have you?"

"No."

"Let me know if you do."

"I will." My hand was on the doorknob.

"Good. Good luck tonight, Hiccup."

"Thanks doc." Freedom was an empty hospital corridor. If I ever saw that dragon again, then I would know that I was fully, irrevocably losing my marbles.

X

My anxiety was ramped up to the point where I wished I hadn't flat-out refused medication at the start of my treatment, but in the end it turned out to be a lot of fuss over nothing. Wednesday's are rarely a big business day in hardware sales, which I had completely forgotten. There was little work to do, and less so for me since everyone was walking on eggshells, afraid to ask me to do anything for fear I'd lose the other leg or some such.

Tuff was probably the only person aside from the customers who didn't regard me any differently than before. He asked if he could kick my prosthetic, then asked if I'd kick him with it, then he said that if I was ever robbed I could use the leg as a blunt instrument. After that he seemed to have exhausted what little interest he had in my problems, and began complaining about his sister's Bridezilla-style wedding planning.

"She's driving me nuts, man. I tell ya, don't ever have a twin; they try to run your life." I could have told him condescendingly that there was no possible way for me to ever have a twin, but I pushed down the urge to be a dick. I was doing.

The night ended. We closed the store. I was exhausted, and I went home and went to bed rather than staying up on the internet. The next day went similarly. Nothing exciting happened, nothing stressful. The cashiers were just as lazy as always, and the customers were selfish and idiotic, and the managers were clueless and hid from everyone to avoid doing their jobs. The people who knew about my leg acted differently when I was around, but by now that was something I was almost used to. In fact, it was the ones who didn't know, the ones who treated me like shit, and talked down to me, or were just blissfully ignorant that threw me off.

Relieving it might be, but at times I felt myself creeping steadily

toward frustrated. When I realized that I was just a word or two away from snapping at somebody, I had to consciously pull myself back. By the end of the second day I was feeling high-strung, but no more than usual. Nowhere near panic-attack levels of stress. People were always douchebagsâ€”they were always going to be horrible, and self-centered. Things like that never changed. There was no reason for me to get worked up, no need for me to give them the satisfaction.

I kept telling myself that. I'd been telling myself that since I got this job. Every time somebody looks at me like I'm an idiot, or calls me one, I have to bite my tongue to keep from telling them I'm a certified fucking genius. I taught myself to run code, I can do calculus in my head, and if it weren't for the pesky little issue of me not having a degree or certification, I could go get a job as an engineer, or an electrician, or a mechanic, or any number of other things. When you work in retail or any sort of customer service, the people who think you're stupid are typically uneducated themselves, or have never had to work a day in their lives. They aren't worth the anger, but words have a way of working their way into your brain, no matter how steely a facade you build for yourself.

The weekend was long, but quiet for the most part. Quiet until my phone rang Sunday morning and Merida asked me if I had some free time.

"I've not spent as much time exploring the city as I'd like. Is there anywhereâ€”naturey we could go?" The nearest thing I could think of was Burgess Park. She said she'd meet me there in half an hour.

For a wonder, I got there first. I drove, even though it wasn't far. I didn't want to tire myself too quicklyâ€”walking was getting easier every day, and most of the time it barely hurt. On occasion I would go for a minute or two without thinking about it, and then I'd move, or look down and see the plastic, and I'd remember. The sharp pang I felt whenever this happened had to dull sooner or later, didn't it? One day I'd wake up and strap on my leg and I wouldn't even feel miserable about it. That, at least, was something to look forward to.

"Oh, this place is fab!" Merida declared as she got out of her dad's Range Rover, wearing shorts and a band t-shirt, her hair slung back in a loose pony-tail. "It reminds me of Alexandra Park, back home!"

"Is it as big as this?" I asked, looking out over the rolling field that dipped down into a small pond before the trees took over.

"I can't tell from here," she said, shielding her eyes from the sun as she stood on her toes, looking over the wrought iron fence.

"Well then, shall we?" I offered her my arm, all gentleman-like, and she took it with a snort.

Today the park was busy. It was Sunday, and kids were screaming in the fenced off play-area, dogs leaned into the ends of their leashes, dragging flustered-looking owners along, and couples traipsed hand-in-hand on the uneven paving stones. I felt a silly little twist in my stomach when I realized that people looking at us must think we were a couple, and I bit my lip to fight the grin that threatened to

take over my face. We weren't. Not yet. But maybe.

"Did you play here when you were little?" she asked me, slowing as we passed the colorful little fence that kept the kids safe from whatever dangers the park might present.

"I did," I said, gesturing to the giant kiddy-castle, "but we didn't have any of these new-fangled plastic implements these kids get nowadays."

"No?" she asked smirking as we continued on.

"No. We had splintery wood, and rusty metal, and we were grateful." She laughed, and I showed her the scar on my chin, one that I'd gotten courtesy of a metal horse on a corroded spring that had sent me sprawling on the now torn-up blacktop. Jack had told me I should tell people that I'd earned it in a knife fight, but I doubted anyone would believe that my scrawny ass knew any kind of fighting.

"What about you?" I asked, "What did you get up to as a kid?"

"Well," she said, "When I was really little we lived in the country, and I was free to do as I pleased, for the most part. There wasn't much around; just woods, and bunnies, and the like. There weren't even any children, so I'd mostly play alone unless a cousin was visiting. I made up imaginary friends though."

"Like what?"

"Will-o-the-wisps," she said, as if I'd know what that was supposed to mean.

"Okay."

"They're spirits. I would play with them for hours, chasing them through the trees. Mum used to fear I'd get lost, but they'd always lead me home safely." The look of nostalgia on her face made something stutter in my chest. "Figuratively, of course," she said, almost sadly.

"Hey, they could have been real."

"Oh? You believe in forest spirits?"

"Of course."

"And dragons, too," she giggled.

"And dragons, too," I agreed, turning and staring straight ahead. A path loomed ahead, leading into the shade of the trees, and we headed right for it. Merida didn't seem to notice anything was wrong, and I managed to shake the image of the night fury from my mind. _It wasn't real_, I thought, though a little nagging voice in the back of my mind hissed in disagreement.

"So," she said after a few minutes of silent plodding along the quiet trail. A small stream trickled to our right, too shallow for fish, but plenty deep for mosquitos. I slapped one away from my neck, just as she said, "My dad seems to like you."

"Is that a good thing?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, don't girls usually want to date guys their parents hate?" I meant it to be teasing, of course, and she sneered at me, sticking her tongue out between her teeth.

"Don't be daft. I don't care what my parents thinkâ€”I'd date you even if they thought you were a complete idiot."

"So, does that mean you wanna date me?" I asked, still teasing, but flushing from the back of my neck, up to my hairline.

"I haven't decided," she said coyly, though I caught the way her face reddened, even though she ducked her head, pretending to be fascinated by a katydid scrambling across the pebbles in front of her sneakers.

"Really? That sounded pretty decisive to me."

"Shut it."

I was pretty sure that I spent the rest of the day walking around with a big, dumb grin on my face, but can you really blame me? Even walking at a crawl, it usually takes about an hour to traverse the circumference of the park, but we managed to make it last nearly two. I pointed out the tree I'd lost a kite in, told her in the fall you could still see the tattered remains, and I showed her the hidden little clearing we used to hang out in when we were in high school, and we sat on the old log, and I laughed when she found an old, dirty bong and couldn't figure out what it was. We saw a wild turkey, and she found some deer tracks that she wanted to follow. Luckily they lead directly through a giant thorn-bush, which lead me to wonder how the deer had gotten through.

"It's so amazing how close the city here is to the country," she said, "You drive five minutes past the city-limits and you're in the middle of nowhere."

"Not quite. See, you got the actual City of Berk in the middle," I said, "then the burbs all built up around it, where you and I live, and then after that it's no-man's-land. We call the whole thing Berk, because it's easier. This neighborhood is actually Ravensboro, technically." She laughed, and I realized I'd gone off on a tiny geography tangent. "Sorry," I said sheepishly.

"Don't be. It's cute when you get all informational." We were silent for a moment. The field came back into view through the trees, and she asked, "Do you ever feel cut off from the rest of the world?"

"Not really," I said with a shrug. "We used to drive around a lot when I was in high school, and we'd go out to other towns, out into the sticks and beyond. Sometimes on the weekends even further. Once we got all the way up to the Canadian border but they wouldn't let us through."

"Who? You and Jack?"

"Yeah, andâ€|others. Ruff and Tuff, and my cousin, and myâ€|ex." I didn't want to bring up Astrid, not to the girl who possibly wanted to date me, for whatever unfathomable reason.

We reached the parking lot after an eternity that I didn't particularly want to end. My leg was telling me to stop, so I leaned against the rear bumper of my car. "I still can't believe you have a car like this," she sighed wistfully.

"Did I tell you I basically had to rebuild the whole engine block on it?" I blurted, and her eyes went wide, almost comically so.

"You know how to work on cars?"

"Don't sound so shocked," I said with a pained look, "Am I not masculine enough to read a manual?"

"It's not that you tosser," she said, shoving my arm playfully, "I just mean that my dad doesn't really need any more reasons to swoon over you."

"Oh, so he's swooning now?"

"Everything I tell him about you," she grumbled, "he likes you more and more. And with mum backing me up, he actually believes me, unlike most times when he thinks I'm making things up so he won't be rude."

"Don't worry," I said reassuringly, "Dads usually like me anyway. I'm very non-threatening with my scrawny arms, and nerdisms, and superhero t-shirts." That was why Astrid's dad had liked me, though he'd been a bit more condescending about it, guffawing when he walked in on me helping her with trig, or plucking at my Superman shirt and asking if I was looking for inspiration. No wonder her mother was divorcing his ass.

That was a terrible thought, I told myself, but it was true. Astrid's dad was a royal prick. If I was making Fergus "swoon" then that was all to the good.

"I don't think you're very scrawny at all," Merida said, an obvious lie, but I would take what I could get.

"Thanks," I said wryly.

"I mean it. You're not scrawny, you'reâ€|wiry."

I laughed, "That's a good one. I'll have to remember the next time my uncle calls me a fish-bone." I felt her hand squeezing mine; her skin was soft, warm, dotted with freckles, and her hand looked small in my awkward, bony grasp.

"You really don't think you're worth it, do you Hiccup?" she asked, expression a bit too serious for a muggy parking lot on a Sunday afternoon.

"Iâ€|what do you mean?" My free hand was on the back of my neck, and I pulled it away, stuffing it in my pocket.

"Because of your legâ€|or not just thatâ€|you don't think you deserve to be happy."

"Where'd you get that idea?" I asked, somewhat alarmed. Serious conversations are not my forte.

"I talked a bit with your friends this weekâ€|not _deliberately_ behind your back. They brought it up, mind you. They said you haven't been yourself. They worry about you, Hiccup," she told me, using the same tone she'd had during my panic attack, calming and gentle, but commanding and stern at the same time.

"Well, they shouldn't," I mumbled, "I'm justâ€|" I couldn't think of anything to say.

"You should be glad to have friends who worry for you," she said, and for once I didn't care that somebody was telling me what I should feel, "You know I've hardly had any real friends? And I left them behind in Glasgow. I'll probably never be that close with them again, either."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. If I hadn't left home, I wouldn't be where I am now," she looked up at me then, locking her eyes onto mine.

"And that's a good thing?"

"It's a very good thing," she agreed. Her voice was low, and her gaze was fierce, and before I knew what she was doingâ€|though I had an ideaâ€|I felt her hand on my neck, and she was on her toes. Her lips pressed to mine, and I was frozen for about two seconds. After that, I was lost.

X

muffled shouting in the distance Goodbye my friends I am gone (to bed).

End
file.